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Life in Samsara: Torment, Torture and Tolerance in Buddhist Hell

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Life in *Saṃsāra*: Torment, Torture and Tolerance in Buddhist Hell

Senior Project submitted to:
The Division of Language and Literature
of Bard College

by

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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to those who have been through rough times.

Für Mama, Daddy und Oma.

In Gedenken an Melody

Acknowledgements

It was in Kristin Scheible's class about Buddhist Thought and Practice that I first got interested in the idea of Buddhist hell. One of the homework readings was about the Buddhist concept of hell and it struck me as odd because I didn't even know that Buddhists *had* a hell. I was reading, and the one part that stuck with me the most was about hell beings being cooked in massive vats of boiling copper. That image remained with me for a long time. Whenever I describe the idea of a Buddhist hell to someone, who is equally surprised about its existence as I was, I mention this example (see Figure 1).

So when I got to class I was quite excited to hear more about this grotesque hell I had read about. But no one else in class was as intrigued by these hells as me, and I was confused about that. I think some people thought my interest about the hells was weird. Coming back to this topic is a wonderful opportunity because it certainly is something that shook my worldview in many aspects. It gave me a new perspective on cosmic order and the universe, on the concept of an unfortunate rebirth¹ and the idea of flexible time and it challenged my deep-rooted western view of Buddhism. The chance to write about something that could so destabilize my way of thinking, something that is both mysterious and fascinating to me, is an honor.

I want to thank my family for being so supportive and loving in this stressful time and always. Danke Mama, danke Oma, thank you Daddy! I love you all so much. I also want to thank my friends who have been more than wonderful and helpful. And of

¹ Rebirth – The certainty of a reincarnation after the present lifetime, regardless of type of existence.

course Kristin, without whose help this would never have been a project. Thank you so much for being the most amazing adviser and mentor I could ever dream of. I also want to thank Jim and Rob for always helping me out and giving brilliant feedback.

It feels very strange to be completing this project. Not only is it concluding a year's worth of work, but also my time at Bard. I have had a fair share of unpleasant and miserable times here, but looking back, it has been the most amazing time of my life so far. The number of great experiences I have had and will cherish for the rest of my life seem countless. Not only have I found friends for life, but also learned more than I thought I could about myself. Bard is the closest thing to home outside of Mannheim I have had in the past six years, and what a great one it was. The luck of having my family living so close to me is indescribable, and without them nearby, my life at Bard would have been far less enjoyable.

Thanks for everything Bard, you're cool and I'll miss you.



² Figure 1

² Figure 1, <http://bit.ly/15o6HAo>, December 2012

Preface

The Personal Hell

It may seem that hell is everywhere and inevitable. Living in this world, *samsāra*,³ becomes inseparable from experiencing dis-ease, *duḥkha*,⁴ and impermanence, *anitya*⁵ in whatever life form. The reason humans can create hell in their minds is due to the constant repetitions they construct. Usually the moment of distress, sadness or terror that drives people into despair is relatively short. Humans do not get over bad events as quickly as they happen. Humans have become masters at making the days, weeks, months and even years after a traumatic event into a personal hell of repetition. Even though *anitya* will prevail in the end and permits one to move on, the immediate state of despair created in the mind is hell in its purest form. Instead of letting demons inflict physical torments, the individual inflicts the worst and most personal pains onto him or herself by reliving trauma through memory.

Knowing that a painful event is over should help heal emotional wounds as soon as it ends. These wounds, however, seem to deepen and become more painful after the actual incident. Once left alone with painful thoughts, hell really begins. The mind does not allow one to move on, but rather forces the individual to dwell endlessly on the pain previously experienced. Reliving past events and imagining what the future could have held is played over and over in the mind like a movie on an endless repeat loop. This

³ *samsāra* - (Sanskrit): literally, 'wandering', the beginningless cycle of birth, death and rebirth, composed of the realms of gods, demigods, humans, animals, ghosts and hell beings. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is liberation from *samsāra*.

⁴ *duḥkha* – dis-ease, suffering

⁵ *anitya* - impermanence

repetition in the head is the hell that no one else can be responsible for but oneself. Control seems lost since, consciously, no one would choose to experience these horrors. It becomes very clear that *samsāra* truly is a place of pain and anguish, and escape is nearly impossible. Hell is manifested wherever an individual chooses to make it. Unable to escape oneself, the only option is to live with this personal hell on earth. No one else can make thoughts go away or change them. At best, people trying to help from the outside can alleviate some pain and suffering, but will never be able to eradicate everything. Even though in full control of all life choices, the individual has absolutely no choice when it comes to the hell in the mind. When hell becomes more permanent, as in a depression, help from the outside is essential, but will not be able to cure anything without the individual curing him or herself.

Reliving past events binds to the pain. The constant repetitions in the mind of things such as conversations, images and emotions from the past are hurtful. The enormous capability of the human brain to create wonderful things also gives the capability to imagine and relive horrible things as realistically as if they were actually happening. Most of it stays in the subconscious, but in times of vulnerability and suffering these thoughts come to the surface and make the healing process even more difficult. One memory leads to the next, which leads deeper into the spiral of the personal hell in the mind.

Repeating short clips of memories and excerpts from a conversation that happened before a terrible event stay trapped in the mind, making detachment from these memories more difficult. Instead of letting these memories go to make space for new ones, the individual clings to them. It is as if the mind were a prison, in which

oneself is both the punished and the punisher. Once alone in the mind, no one else is there to torture but the self. The self alone is the evildoer, hurting from within. If it were possible to master the art of not thinking emotionally with the heart, but rather only logically with the brain, these pains would be significantly less and wounds would heal much faster. Achieving Buddhahood⁶ entails exactly this: freedom from suffering and attachment. Every action taken in life is a choice. When creating the personal hells it seems as if control is lost over thoughts and one becomes their helpless victim. The choice between thinking and *not* thinking these thoughts seems completely annihilated.

Keeping a brave face to the world outside may be easier for some than others, but on the inside hell can be tearing the individual apart. The divide between what is felt and how one acts can be a means to overcome suffering. The personal, mental hells created by the self are the worst because no one knows better and with more detail what exactly hurts the most and how these pains are triggered. Other people's actions are out of the individual's control. One can hope to influence them and their decisions, but ultimately must live with other people's decisions and actions. One individual cannot change another's thoughts, feelings or hopes. Every person is unique in his or her emotions and others must learn to live around them. Sometimes people must learn to deal and live with unwanted events and things. This is very challenging because humans make plans and imagine their lives a certain way. Disappointment is part of *samsāra*, since the individual has no control about what happens outside of his or her own actions.

⁶ Buddhahood – having attained enlightenment, become a Buddha.

Images of hell are essential in Buddhism because they are a means to show suffering. Not only are they visual aids, but also serve as a unifying tool. The didactic use of images is to create a communal hell for the viewers. The interpretation through representation of hell through images and literature can be shared. A comforting factor amongst all the pain and suffering one experiences is knowing that this is not a unique feeling. The fact that others suffer too does not eliminate or lessen the personal pains; however, it is somewhat consoling to know that others also experience hardships.

The feelings of pain and sadness cannot be eliminated by reason. The only thing that can help to ease the pain away and slowly recover is time. Time, as well as *duḥkha*, is impermanent. Living according to Buddhist ideals and rules entails acceptance of events even if they may hurt. Knowing that even the worst pain will subside, even if it never fully goes away, can be comforting. It can always be reasoned and logically explained that suffering is impermanent; the actual suffering in that moment, however, is very real. Almost nothing can be done in the short term to actually lessen the pain triggered by terrible events. There is no other way to get over these feelings than to live through all the pain and learn to live with it, knowing that it will not always be as bad. The painful memory of a happy event that can never happen again due to personal loss haunts many, like nightmares that never seem to come to an end. Knowing that nothing will change, the mind instinctively relives and repeats everything imaginable that does not allow letting go and moving on. Buddhists understand this concept of continuous repetition that causes so much personal agony and call it hell.

No matter where the body goes, the mind follows it everywhere. Physical locations can be changed, but never will one be separated from memories and thoughts.

This prison created for the self is the personal hell from which no one but the self can salvage from. Even if getting support from family and friends, the actual healing and recovery can only be done by the self. Even though *anitya* is usually negative, in this relationship with *duḥkha* knowing that nothing is permanent can be reassuring. Even though involuntary, every human will at some point experience the piercing pain of the death of someone loved, an unwanted breakup and innumerable other things that cause irreversible pain. These experiences are all caused by impermanence, luckily the pain they cause, is also impermanent.

Exactly this idea of *anitya* is why Buddhist hell, in all its horrible and grotesque forms, is so important even though it is one that is often overlooked. To continue on the path towards enlightenment, one must suffer for all the wrong doings from previous states of being. Atonement through suffering, retribution through pain, and the seemingly endless torture of the body, soul and mind is the only way to further oneself on the way to achieving enlightenment. Just as life is not a permanent state of being, hell is also a temporary situation. Regardless of the length or amount of suffering, one will eventually be released from the personal hell in which one is confronted to continue the process of personal betterment. This project will explore the creativity and structure of the Buddhist imagination of hell through images and texts.

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Introduction

A Place of Torment

In this project I want to introduce the subject of Buddhist hell, its interpretation of time, location, its communities and its representation in art. This is a survey of texts about Buddhist hell from various Buddhist cultures, including images from Southeast, East and Central Asia. The images will help to orient the reader, visualizing some of the intense torments that exist there. These images are a fleshy, visceral and visual introduction to Buddhist hells. They enhance the intensity of Buddhist hells because they are based on the perception that these images are going to create a special hell for the viewer. The images are shockingly violent and gory, and theologically, they serve to both scare the viewer into good action and avoidance of bad actions and therefore become memorable. Traditionally “it [was] hoped that these lurid descriptions would serve as encouragement for beings to traverse the proper path of conduct, escaping the devastation depicted in the hells.”¹ Furthermore, “these [hell imagery] scrolls hint at the usage of hell imagery within a public sphere. Monks would edify laity with visions of the torments of hell that awaited them [...]”² Part of ancient teachings, the images I use in this project are not only supposed to show the non-Buddhist reader what Buddhist hell really looks like, but also to emphasize its intensity and to serve as a didactic tool.

¹ Prebish, Charles S. *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism*. The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, NJ & London 1993. p. 137

² Buswell, Jr., Robert E. *Encyclopedia of Buddhism: Volume One A-L*. MacMillan Reference, p. 318

Images help to orient the diversity of Buddhist depictions of hells. They visually represent the Buddhist fears and torments in a future life. “The Buddhist hell is a place of torment in which former sins are expiated, but it is only a temporary state and may be immediately followed by re-birth in one of the higher *devalokas*.³”⁴ It is also argued that “the original function of hell in Buddhism was to illustrate the workings of *kamma*;⁵ the later Buddhist traditions [...] largely built on the same principles as the ideas about hell in early Buddhism.”⁶ Various realms of hell are described in great detail, each with one specific feature that is unique to every individual hell. In this description of hell, the *Crushing Hell* is illustrated in detail. The story tells how and why these hell beings are tortured in the way they are:

The Crushing Hell

In this hell, beings by the million are thrown into vast mortars of iron the size of whole valleys. The henchmen of *Yama*⁷, the Lord of Death, raise their huge hammers of red-hot metal, as big as Mount Meru⁸, above their heads and pound their victims with them. These beings are crushed to death, screaming and weeping in unimaginable agony and terror. As the hammers are lifted, they come back to life, only to suffer the same torments over and over again.

Sometimes, the mountains on both sides of the valley turn into the heads of stags, deer, goats, rams and other animals that the hell beings have killed in their past lives. The beasts butt against each other with their horn-tips spewing fire, and innumerable hell beings, drawn there by the power of their actions, are all crushed to death. Then, once

³ *devalokas* – world of the gods

⁴ Pali Dictionary p. 260, cited from Law, B. C. *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*. p. 95

⁵ *kamma* – (Pali; Sanskrit: *karma*): literally, ‘action’, the law of the cause and effect of actions, according to which virtuous deeds result in happiness in the future and non-virtuous deeds result in suffering (Lopez, Jr., Donald S, eds. *Buddhist Scriptures*. Penguin Classics. 2004).

⁶ Braarvig, Jens. *Numen 56: “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?”* Brill 2009. p. 281

⁷ *Yama* – the Lord of the dead

⁸ Mount *Meru* – (Sanskrit): in Buddhist cosmology, [Mount *Meru*] is the mountain in the center of the universe. Gods inhabit its surface and summit (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin Classics 2004). In Pali literature, not the earth, but Mount *Meru* is the symbol of stability.

more, as the mountains separate, they revive only to be crushed again.

Two hundred human years are equivalent of one day for the gods of the *Heaven Without Fighting*. Two thousand years in that realm correspond to one day in the *Crushing Hell*, and the beings in that hell live two thousand years.⁹

In many hells the sufferers are experiencing very precise punishments that relate directly to the evil deeds they have committed in their past lives. The *Crushing Hell* illustrates this with the use of animals as punishers. This story encompasses all aspects of clearly identifying Buddhist hell. In the first section it discusses the physicality and appearance of hell. Even though it does not give a roadmap of where this hell could be located, it can be assumed that it is a very large area since there needs to be space for “vast mortars of iron the size of whole valleys.” Not only is it enormous, but also the number of hell beings punished there. The punishers are there to inflict “agony and terror” onto the hell beings in order for them to remain in a state of fear at all times.

The other beings residing in this hell are animals that were previously abused and used by the hell beings. The hell beings’ *karmic* actions have led them to this unfortunate rebirth in which they experience the pains they have previously caused others. In Figure 2, an image of Japanese Buddhist hell, the stampede of animals trampling over the hell beings illustrates the intensity, danger and visualization of this hell. The community of hell inhabitants is here illustrated as hell beings, animals and henchmen of *Yama*. Even though not all hells include animals in this particular form as primary punishments, many other Buddhist hells also mention animals tearing at hell

⁹ Patrul Rinpoche. *The Words of my Perfect Teacher*. p. 64

beings as part of their punishment. The final section of this hell-story discusses time. Instead of deciding a finite number of years to describe this hell, a number of similes are used to attempt to define this incalculable number of years.

Contrasting to other religions and explanations for a birth in hell, Buddhism does not blame a rebirth in hell on one individual's bad actions. The concept of *self* in Buddhism is very complex; hence the *self* is not only what is experienced in a single lifetime. The existence is stretched over millions of years, various births included. The self is comprised of births as humans, animals, gods and other forms of existence. Every single bad action in any one of those lives accumulates to an all-encompassing bad *karmic* potential. As opposed to humans, "animals, ghosts and hell beings have little freedom for intentional good or bad actions."¹⁰ Since these life forms have very little personal agency, accumulating good *karma* in one of the lower realms is much more difficult than, for example, in a human birth.

¹⁰ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 41



¹¹ Figure 2

¹¹ Figure 2, <http://bit.ly/ZBmrba>, December 2012

In the first chapter of this project, I will consider the way Buddhists understand time in hell. The single lifetime that is remembered, experienced and one is most involved in, is not so important on a larger scale of time and the greater universe. This idea emphasizes the relativity and brevity of the human (or animal) life span and supports the Buddhist view of infinite rebirths and therefore an infinite existence. If there are an infinite number of rebirths to await and an infinite number of lives to live while the universe collapses and reconstructs itself innumerable times, one single life in hell does not seem as significant and long as it does to a human. Viewing hell as a temporary state furthers the concept of a transitory existence in either hell, human, *deva*¹², *preta*¹³ or animal realms. If no rebirth is ever eternal, the vision of a rebirth in hell is more tolerable than knowing that once reborn in hell, this state will last forever.

In Buddhism, the aspect of time is crucial, impermanence being one of the most important concepts of the religion. Impermanence is the explanation for why no one will ever be truly happy in *saṃsāra*, and why a short human lifetime is almost negligible in relation to the number of rebirths experienced until hopefully one day reaching *nirvāṇa*.¹⁴ Nothing in any realm of existence is permanent, and even the hells themselves, as the hell-dwellers' existences in the hells, are impermanent. As a human on earth, following the Buddhist traditions and consciously taking care of their good *karma*, the knowledge of not having to spend eternity in hell is mildly reassuring.

¹² *deva* – deity

¹³ *preta* – hungry ghost

¹⁴ *nirvāṇa* – (Sanskrit; Pali: *nibbana*): literally 'blowing out', the cessation of suffering and hence the goal of Buddhist practice. The nature of *nirvāṇa* is widely interpreted in Buddhist literature, with distinctions being made between the vision of *nirvāṇa* that destroys the seeds of future rebirth and the final *nirvāṇa* entered upon death (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin Classics 2004).

In my second chapter I will consider where Buddhists locate hell. In Tibetan Buddhism hell is located in the Wheel of Existence, a physical representation of *samsāra* held up by *Yama*, the Henchman of Death. Here, hell is as important a part of life in *samsāra* as the human realm. Viewing hell as merely another realm of rebirth makes it seem less unfair or unlikely to be reborn into. There are many descriptions and interpretations of the realm of hell, most very similar in the way the hell-dwellers are being punished, but very different in terms of the description of hell's location. Whereas the Nyingma Tibetan tradition expressed by Patrul Rinpoche organizes the hells by level of intensity and evil *karma* committed in a previous life on top of each other like a building, other traditions do not structure it in this way. Some descriptions do not give any guidelines as to where the hells could be located. This creates a space in the mind of the reader, allowing for the individual's imagination to be the designer of where hell is taking place.

Even though some Buddhist traditions teach that “the principal Hells are eight in number” and that there are “eight hot hells [and] eight cold hells,”¹⁵ it is also argued that “the overall number of world systems that constitute the universe in its entirety cannot be specified.”¹⁶ Thinking about these individual hells in different locations broadens the perspective on hells in general. Since one is not bound to imagine one single location underneath the earth as a possible location but rather have the entire universe to place them makes it more difficult to realistically imagine. This, in turn, allows the texts to be the primary agent in creating this imaginary world for the reader.

¹⁵ B.C. Law, *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*, p. 94

¹⁶ Buswell, Jr., Robert E., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Volume One A-L, MacMillan Reference, p. 184

The vagueness of possible locations in separate universes is paralleled by a very clear and organized description of what and how the hells are organized.

Buddhists believe that the universe consists of many spheres, each of which has its own earth, sun, moon, heavens and hells. Each of these spheres is made up of multiple realms of existence. Considering that in Buddhism, hell is not a fixed location but fairly free in its manifestation and location allows for a greater range of places and individual universes to be reborn into. Interestingly, “the universe has no specific creator; the sufficient cause for its existence is to be found in the Buddhist cycle of casual conditioning known as *pratityasamutpada* (dependent origination).”¹⁷

Analyzing a space and place such as Buddhist hell allows for various interpretations from an academic perspective. Buddhist hell’s view on time, location and its community is supported by images from various Buddhist traditions across Asia. Posing the possibility of hell only existing in the mind instead of in a physical location also opens up possibilities of interpreting the entire concept of hell as metaphorical. The sins one has committed in this lifetime may not be the only cause for one’s rebirth in hell. Accumulated *karma* over innumerable births all add up until the *karmic* potential has reached a point in which a rebirth in hell is justified. If oneself is not the only cause for the rebirth in hell, why then, must the Buddhist suffer the punishment for “other people’s” bad actions? Buddhists argue that “every god, human being, animal, restless ghost or habitant of hell has been born in exactly that state because of his or her earlier actions, and not because they are punished or rewarded by a god or divine

¹⁷ Buswell, Jr., Robert E., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Volume One A-L, MacMillan Reference, p. 183

being.”¹⁸ This means that previous lives are equally as important to the current life as the actual current life. One should not separate previous births from now, but view them all as one entity.

Understanding that this lifetime in hell is equally part of existence in *saṃsāra* as the lifetime as a human takes a lot of the fear away and allows for acceptance of life in *saṃsāra*. Rather than scaring people into good behavior, good behavior is encouraged by reaping the rewards of good *karma*, namely a positive rebirth. Even if Buddhists do good things all their life, they will still be reborn in hell eventually. No one can escape *saṃsāra*; hence no one can escape hell. Even “the Buddha says that to believe in these [*karmic*] principles, and so live a moral life, will lead to a good rebirth.”¹⁹ This encouragement, even if it does not guarantee exclusion from hell, does give light to a positive future. Even the most meritorious people will experience a birth in hell; therefore being good cannot eliminate this, but it will lessen its intensity. Good people will benefit from the reaping of their good *karma* because a whole life lead with positive energy and good actions will have positive results. Therefore, even if reborn in hell, it will not, for example, be into *Avīci*.²⁰ Though severity and duration of suffering varies with each reincarnation, the hell cycle eventually ends, bringing the individual closer to attaining enlightenment.

¹⁸ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 255

¹⁹ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 44

²⁰ *Avīci* – worst of all Buddhist hells; later discussed in more detail.

Chapter 1

Time***Measurable Eternity***

Buddhist conceptions of time are abstract and frequently immeasurable. Mindfulness teaches to pay attention to the moment, and not only measure time in minutes and days. Different from time measurement in other traditions, the numbers used to describe distance and time in the Buddhist *sūtras*²¹ and commentaries are imaginary numbers used only to describe rhetorically very long duration, and not to be taken as accurate numbers. Furthermore, Buddhist thought about life continues far beyond death. Instead of being bound eternally to either heaven or hell after death, one simply reenters the realm of existence forever, or until *nirvāṇa* is reached. “All beings are continually reborn in the various realms in accordance with their past *karma*; the only escape from this endless round of rebirth, [...] *saṃsāra*, is the knowledge that constitutes the attainment of *nirvāṇa*.”²²

The immediacy that is emphasized with the brevity of human life is that after one has suffered for *kalpas*²³ or *aeons*²⁴ in hell, one has the possibility, even though not the guarantee, to immediately be reborn into a higher realm. Rebirth in a higher realm,

²¹ *sūtra* – (Sanskrit; Pali: *sutta*): literally, ‘aphorism’, a discourse traditionally regarded as having been spoken by the Buddha or spoken with his sanction (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin Classics 2004).

²² Buswell, Jr., Robert E., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Volume One A-L, MacMillan Reference, p. 183

²³ *kalpa* – measure for a period of time

²⁴ *aeon* – extremely long time period

that of the gods or of humans, shows that one's *karmic* potential has been substantially lessened after the time suffered in hell. The possibilities of such an improvement in rebirth, from hell-dweller to human, could be worth the time spent in hell. Realizing the rarity and unlikelihood of the privilege of being born as a human emphasizes that this opportunity is supposed to be used to do good in this life, and intentionally nourish good *karma*. Understanding how unique it is to be born in the human realm is enhanced by the extreme time periods with which the other realms are described. The human birth is of most importance because it is the only state in which *nirvāṇa* can be attained.

Besides the incalculable years spent in hell, another reason why hell is so horrific is that everything happens on a repetitive basis. Every punishment is short in itself, but it will, however, be repeated with immediacy for what seems like an eternity in human perspective. This concept of repetition is used as a punishment in itself. Since the hell beings are aware what awaits them as soon as they are sliced apart, skinned or eaten alive, this causes a different type of pain and anxiety in contrast to having different torments inflicted on them continuously without warning. Repetition is a central aspect of the punishments in hell. The beings reborn in their specific hells have been reborn there for actions they have committed in the past. The punishments are also specific to each hell, and beings are condemned to suffer in their hell until their next rebirth. Spending an immeasurable time suffering the same tortures only intensifies their punishments because they have absolutely no other option.

The creatures dwelling in hell are never completely destroyed. They are merely murdered and tortured in a way that allows them to revive again, without actually being reincarnated. The total destruction of the hell-dwellers would be pointless since

that would mean they could be reborn into a different realm without completing their accrued time in hell and eradicating their evil *karma*. Therefore, there is “no total destruction of the inhabitants of hell.”²⁵ Framing hell-dwellers as inhabitants and stating that they may never be totally destroyed suggests that there is a force or some sort of power that has control and that oversees this process of destruction. In Buddhism, there is a cosmic order in which all universes symbiotically coexist, therefore the ways in which hell works is a natural part of this existence that does not need a single deciding force, which eliminates the need for one all encompassing, almighty God. “Buddhism sees no need for a creator of the world, as it postulates no ultimate beginning to the world, and regards it as sustained by natural laws,”²⁶ there is no other force but *karma* to govern all known and unknown universes. Interestingly and quite opposite to all other religions, “if there were a creator of the world, he would be regarded as responsible for the suffering which is found throughout it.”²⁷

Depicted in Figure 3 is a Tibetan *thanka*²⁸ of the Wheel of Existence, all forms of existence are represented here. The *thanka* is a detailed painting on fabric in which all stages of existence are depicted. *Yama*, at the top of the wheel, is the Henchman of Death. He holds the wheel of life in his arms. The never-ending cycle of life and rebirth is depicted here. The captured hell beings cannot escape this cycle unless they reach enlightenment, and therefore enter the eternal *nirvāṇa*. “On some accounts the wheel represents a mirror held up by *Yama* to a dying person and revealing the various

²⁵ Law, B.C. *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*. Delhi. p. 102

²⁶ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 36

²⁷ *Jat.v.238*, cited from Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 36

²⁸ *thanka* – Tibetan Buddhist religious painting on a scroll

possibilities for the next rebirth open to them.”²⁹ Every section of *Yama’s* circle is a different realm of rebirth. Hell is the bottom-most section, equally a part of the cycle as humans, animals, *devas* and *pretas*. Describing the image:

In the circular diagram of the *bhavacakra*,³⁰ [...] there are three realms below the line and three above. This simple division reflects a qualitative difference in that the three realms below the middle line (hell, the ghosts, and animals) are particularly unfortunate places to be reborn, while those above the line (heaven, *asuras*,³¹ and the human world) are more pleasant.³²

The Wheel of Existence depicts all of the life forms that can be attained. The hell realms are located inside the wheel, but still at the bottom. However, even though they are the lowest realm, they are not separated from other realms. Amidst hungry ghosts and animals, hell beings are part of the circle that revolves endlessly. Continuously circling around in the Wheel of Existence beings migrate from one state of existence to the next.

Hell beings, hungry ghosts, animals, men, anti-gods, and six classes of gods dwell in the first realm (desire). In the second realm (forms) dwell gods who have practiced certain *dhyānas*³³ or meditations. In the final realm (formless) dwell those beings who have attained the four stages of formlessness.³⁴

²⁹ Keown, Damien, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 247

³⁰ *bhavacakra* – symbolic representation of *samsāra*

³¹ *asura* – anti-god, demon

³² Keown, Damien, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 247

³³ *dhyāna* – meditative absorption; steady, mindful concentration in a single physical sensation or mental notion. Sometimes used to denote meditation in general, rather than specific states of absorption (Robinson, Richard H. and Johnson, Willard L. *The Buddhist Religion*. Wadsworth Publishing Company).

³⁴ Prebish, Charles S., *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, NJ & London 1993, p. 97



³⁵ Figure 3

³⁵ Figure 3. *Wheel of Existence*. Tibet, 19th century. Pigments on cloth. C2006.66.131, HAR,78. Rubin



³⁶ Figure 4

³⁶ Figure 4. Detail. *Wheel of Existence*. Tibet, 19th century. Pigments on cloth. C2006.66.131, HAR,78. Rubin Museum of Art, New York City

“At the very center of the wheel are shown three animals (see Figure 4): a cock, a pig and a snake, which represent the ‘three poisons’ of greed (*raga*), hatred (*dveṣa*) and delusion (*moha*). It is these forces that create bad *karma* and fuel the endless cycle of rebirth.”³⁷ The use of these animals and attributes to illustrate the universe’s bad *karmic* possibilities shows how important these three concepts are in Buddhist thought and practice. Defining all fuel for the cycle of rebirth with greed, hatred and delusion is supposed to illuminate about the course of nature and how living beings function, whether human or not.

The circle surrounding the three center animals depicts the never-ending cycle of rebirths and constant fluctuation between positive and negative reincarnations. Always in flux from upward to downward and vice versa, reincarnations occur based on the individual’s *karmic* potential and where in the cycle of rebirth they are currently located. The only escape from this “endless round is the direct understanding of the *Four Noble Truths*³⁸ – suffering, its cause, and the path leading to its cessation – and the attainment of *nirvāṇa*.”³⁹ Other life forms besides human and animal include the *preta*, god and *asura*. These other life forms are all described in particular ways. Furthermore, all realms of existence have very distinct restrictions:

Some of the realms [of existence] are visible to us here and now, while others are not. The ones we can see are the human and animal realms, and the ones we cannot see are those of the gods, the Titans or *asuras*, and hell. On the borderline is the realm of the ghosts, beings who hover on the fringes of the human world and who are occasionally caught sight of as they flit between the shadows.⁴⁰

³⁷ Keown, Damien, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 247

³⁸ Four Noble Truths – considered the main teachings of the Buddhist traditions. The Four Noble Truths are *duḥkha*, realizing the cause of *duḥkha* (attachment), ending *duḥkha* (practicing non-attachment) and the path to ending *duḥkha* (learning the practice of non-attachment)

³⁹ Buswell, Jr., Robert E., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Volume One A-L, MacMillan Reference, p. 186

⁴⁰ Keown, Damien, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Routledge, London and New York, p 246

The *asuras* are usually described as jealous gods, and the *pretas* as hungry ghosts. The rebirth as a *preta* is described like this: “[One] will be born as a wandering hungry ghost and after a thousand *kalpas* become an animal. After a thousand *kalpas* more he will again become a man.”⁴¹ The rebirth is due to evil *karmic* potential and should suffice as a punishment. A birth in the realms of the hungry ghosts can be anything, such as a being with a mouth as small as a needle tip but a stomach as large as a whole country, or a thirsty being damned to wandering the earth without ever even hearing the mention of water.⁴² After living as a hungry ghost for a thousand *kalpas*, which is as long as it takes for the universe to collapse and reform itself multiple times, an immeasurable amount of time in human years, the being will then be reborn in the animal realm. That many years and lifetimes in a lower realm of the hungry ghosts and animal realm is supposed to lessen the evil *karma* that had been accumulated over thousands of births in the past which can then finally lead to a rebirth as a human.

In Figure 5 the *preta* realm shows the hungry ghosts at the bottom, entangled in fire and experiencing *duḥkha*, moving with dis-ease. In the very center of this detail a hungry ghost is shown with flaring arms, hopelessly wandering his realm. The huge stomachs and tiny throats of the hungry ghosts are their punishment for gluttony and greed in previous births. The regular lifetime of a hungry ghost could last thousands of *kalpas*. Once born a *preta* or animal it is more difficult to ascend to a human realm birth. A rebirth in these realms can lead to innumerable further rebirths in these realms as well, without leaving or entering other realms of rebirth. Since *karma* is the all-ruling

⁴¹ B.C. Law, *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*, p. 104

⁴² Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of my Perfect Teacher*, p. 72

force, “every god, human being, animal, restless ghost or habitant of hell has been born in exactly that state because of his or her earlier actions, and not because they are punished or rewarded by a god or divine being.”⁴³ Since each action in any previous lives has an effect on future rebirths, the cycle of rebirth is categorized so that “bad deeds make you an animal or a hungry ghost, but a really bad deed brings you to hell – these three states are called bad stages (*duggatti*⁴⁴).”⁴⁵

⁴³ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 255

⁴⁴ *duggatti* – unfortunate form of rebirth

⁴⁵ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 256



⁴⁶ Figure 5

⁴⁶ Figure 5. Detail. *Wheel of Existence*. Tibet, 19th century. Pigments on cloth. C2006.66.131, HAR,78. Rubin Museum of Art, New York City

In Buddhism, the most value and attention is generally paid to the human birth. Born as a human is considered to be the most favorable rebirth amongst Buddhist. Even though there are many hardships to endure in the human birth, it is the only birth in which enlightenment and Buddhahood⁴⁷ can be attained. Many texts emphasize the rarity and importance of the human birth. As most concepts in Buddhism are described with similes, so is the human birth and its extreme rarity:

A man throws a yoke with a hole in it into the sea and it floats everywhere: it is more difficult for a being born in the lower states of existence to attain human birth than it is for a blind turtle coming to the surface of the ocean every hundred years to put its neck through the hole of the yoke.⁴⁸

The human birth is a good rebirth, since it allows for accumulating merit and giving offerings, learning the *dharma*⁴⁹ and becoming part of the *saṅgha*.⁵⁰ A monk's lifetime can be utilized to come closer to enlightenment and eventually reach *nirvāṇa*, as opposed to a layperson that is trying to avoid a bad rebirth, such as one in the hells. This concept is illustrated in the following excerpt:

In the human state one is able – that is, if one hears the teachings of the Buddha – to realize, through insight and meditation, that everything is impermanent and selfless, empty and brings only suffering; then, one does not seek rebirth again neither as humans, gods, or for that sake as animals or in hell, because having given up attachments to a self, and thus any attachment to life in the five [or six] states of existence, in *saṃsāra*, one will reach final extinction in *nibbana*.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Buddhahood – attainment of enlightenment, becoming a Buddha

⁴⁸ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 270, SN I.5.7-8

⁴⁹ *dharma* – (Sanskrit; Pali: *dhmma*): although difficult to translate, the term has two general meanings in Buddhism. The first is the teaching or doctrine of the Buddha, both as expounded and as manifested in practice. The second (in the plural), perhaps rendered as ‘phenomena’, refers to the basic constituents of mind and matter (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin Classics 2004).

⁵⁰ *saṅgha* – (Sanskrit): literally, ‘community’, a term most commonly used to refer to the order of Buddhist monks and nuns, it can be used more generally for any community of Buddhists, including fully ordained monks, fully ordained nuns, male novices, female novices, laymen and laywomen (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin Classics 2004).

⁵¹ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 256

The life spans of humans and gods are very different, and that of hell beings is one of the longest of them all. The relativity between the brevity of a human life in comparison between the lifetimes spent in hell is surprising. So much bad *karma* was accrued over innumerable lifetimes that a rebirth in hell was justified and accounted for with previous bad actions. Realizing the rarity and slim probability of the privilege of being born as a human emphasizes that this opportunity to do good and nourish our good *karma* must be used. Once one is an animal, it is more difficult to ascend to a human realm birth: “There is every reason to avoid the *duggattis*, as they are extremely hard to get out of: it is very difficult to again attain human birth – which of course is a great privilege, because you then may receive the teaching of the Buddha and be liberated from the horrors of *samsāra*.”⁵²

Animal rebirth, however, is one of the three less favorable life forms. Since animals are unable to benefit from Buddhist teachings or attain enlightenment, this state of existence is problematic. The animal birth is considered one of the lower births, alongside the hungry ghosts and hell. Since animals are mainly “driven by instincts they cannot control, and being without a language capable of conveying the subtleties of Buddhist teachings, animals can only hope for an existence relatively free from pain and to be born in a better condition in the next life.”⁵³

The way in which the individual realms of rebirth are described and depicted encourages the Buddhist observer to consider possible outcomes of his or her actions. If it is known that certain bad actions will inevitably lead to a reincarnation in one of the

⁵² Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 270

⁵³ Keown, Damien, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 248

lower realms, the motivation is to avoid these actions. Even though attaining *nirvāṇa* without going through hell at some point is impossible, the more positive actions and deeds one can perform, the more likely one will be to ameliorate future reincarnations. Regardless of which rebirth is attained in a next life, a rebirth in hell will always be inevitable.

Units of Time

Buddhism understands time in terms of units, some short, some long.⁵⁴ Each of these units and measures of time is named and has more than one specific definition, depending on what source one consults. Buddhist texts describe these units of time with extremely vivid similes. Here, a simile that describes the length of an aeon:

Suppose there were twenty *Kosalan*⁵⁵ cartloads of sesamum seed and at the end of every hundred years a man were to take out a seed, just one; well, sooner [...] would those *Kosalan* cartloads of sesamum seed be used up and exhausted in that way [before one aeon concludes]!⁵⁶

Another example of a simile describing an equal time period is as follows:

Suppose there was a great mountain of rock, seven miles across and seven miles high, a solid mass without any cracks. At the end of every hundred years a man might brush it just once with a fine cloth. That great mountain of rock would decay and come to an end sooner than the aeon. So long is an aeon. And of aeons of this length not just one has passed, not just a hundred, not just a thousand, not just a hundred thousand.⁵⁷

These similes are used to allow the reader to comprehend the time periods. The large units referenced most frequently are the *kalpa* and the great *kalpa*. The *kalpa* is a unit of time that describes the amount of time it takes the universe to destroy and rebuild itself. The precise length of a *kalpa* is not defined in years. The Encyclopedia of Buddhism describes the *kalpa* as “the length of time it takes for the universe to complete one full cycle of expansion and contraction [and] is known as a *mahākalpa*.⁵⁸ A *mahākalpa* is made up of four intermediate aeons consisting of the period of

⁵⁴ Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology*, p. 93

⁵⁵ *Kosala* – region in ancient India

⁵⁶ SN I. 152

⁵⁷ SamyuttaNikāya ii, 181-182

⁵⁸ *mahākalpa* – great aeon, great *kalpa*

contraction, the period of expansion, and the period when the world remains expanded. The length of a great aeon is not specified in human years but only by reference to similes.”⁵⁹

None of these periods of time are realistically imaginable by humans. The *kalpa* serves more as an idea of an immense span of time rather than an exact number of years.⁶⁰ The *kalpa* is a measure of time used to describe how long something will take, how much time someone has to spend in a certain place and to measure long periods in the universe. The *kalpa* is nearly the largest unit of time in Buddhist cosmology. The only period longer than a *kalpa* is a *great kalpa*, which duration is eighty *kalpas*.⁶¹ As is traditional for Buddhist texts, the duration of a *kalpa* is described with a simile in order to allow people to visualize this unimaginable amount of time:

[A *kalpa*] is at least the time required to take away all the mustard seeds stored in a castle of one cubic *yojana*⁶² if only one seed is removed every hundred years. Alternatively, it is at least the time taken to wear away a great rock of one cubic *yojana* by wiping it with a piece of soft cotton (*karpasa*) from Kāśī⁶³ once every hundred years.⁶⁴

Only through visualization can humans attempt to comprehend these enormous units of time. The similes that try to give a spatial explanation of these time periods serve as a vehicle for the devout Buddhist reader to imagine time differently. It is also supposed to put into relation the human life that is limited by a very short time in comparison to a *kalpa*. The reason it is important to embrace the notion of time is to understand the length of torture one will endure in hell.

⁵⁹ Buswell, Jr., Robert E., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Volume One A-L, MacMillan Reference, p. 185

⁶⁰ Ibid. p. 183

⁶¹ Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology*, p. 95

⁶² *yojana* – a measure of distance and space, in this example it measures 7.4 cubic kilometers

⁶³ Kāśī – city in Uttar Pradesh, India

⁶⁴ Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology*, p. 96

Rebirth and Revival

In Buddhism, reincarnation and revival are two very distinct concepts. Whereas a revival takes place within hell and can be immediate, rebirth transports one out of the current birth. Reincarnation from hell can take millions of years. The same conception of time can encompass these two vastly different stages of existence: the trillions of years in hell it takes to reach one's next rebirth, or the split second it takes for a revival in hell. While one can spend a *kalpa* being tortured, it can take only the blink of an eye to be revived and tortured all over again. The experience of time as relative in regard to what one is experiencing in the moment is emphasized, so that even such large periods of torment can be felt to pass quite quickly.

Humans, besides animals, have the shortest of all rebirths possible in the Buddhist cosmos. Whereas humans and animals live relatively short lives, various realms of existence's life spans are vastly different. The gods, for example, can live tens of thousands of aeons.⁶⁵ They are in their form for hundreds, thousands, or even millions of human life spans. The length of a rebirth is also determined by one's *karmic* potential. All actions have consequences, and "it is said that acts of hatred and violence tend to lead to rebirth in a hell, acts bound up with delusion and confusion tend to lead to rebirth as an animal, and acts of greed tend to lead to rebirth as a ghost."⁶⁶ Even though all rebirths are governed primarily by *karma*, the actual rebirth itself also has additional aspects of positivity and negativity. The primary form of reincarnation is determined by *karma*, but it does not only dictate which life form one will take on, but

⁶⁵ Buswell, Jr., Robert E., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Volume One A-L, MacMillan Reference, USA, p. 185

⁶⁶ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 39

also in what type of standing this individual will be. Therefore, even if one's *karmic* potential was positive enough to qualify for a human birth, previous negative actions and emotions can cause unpleasant things even in this beneficial birth. *Karma* can be viewed as one's suffering as a reward in correspondence with one's past actions. This also means that negative rewards can also happen in a reincarnation. This other aspect of rebirth is the physical shape one takes on. Considering that the evil *karma* accumulated is "not serious enough to lead to a lower rebirth, [it] affects the nature of a human rebirth: stinginess leads to being poor, injuring beings leads to frequent illness, and anger leads to being ugly."⁶⁷

There is no one single person deciding about good and evil besides the force of *karma*. "In the Buddhist hell one is thus punished by the evil actions themselves, not by some sort of divine justice."⁶⁸ Therefore, "good and bad rebirths are not [...] seen as 'rewards' and 'punishments', but as simply the natural results of certain kinds of action."⁶⁹ The different realms of rebirth carry differing associations with them. Every individual's duration of hell can be vastly different. The duration of time one must spend in a hell depends on the specific hell, which in turn depends on the cause of the punishment. Buddhist hells are divided into such a vast array of different hells, that whereas the least horrible hell can last only a few million years, the worst, *Avīci* can last whole *kalpas*. Since the punishments are constantly being repeated, the revival state of existence seems prolonged even further. The never-ending revival phase of all the hell realms can only be stopped by the final revival, reincarnation. At this stage, instead of

⁶⁷ M.III.203-6, cited from Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 39

⁶⁸ Braarvig, Jens, "The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?" *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 254

⁶⁹ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 39

simply being revived to suffer further millions of years, the hell being has burned off all bad *karma* and can therefore be reincarnated into a different form of existence from the Wheel of Existence.

Having to remain in a certain hell until a true death, or reincarnation, is *karmically* possible gives little hope to the individuals suffering since they may never know *when* this point has come. *Dying* in this case means attaining a new rebirth, out of hell. Having to remain in hell until one's bad *karma* is exhausted means that being punished by demons and hybrid creatures in hell makes up for bad *karma*. In what way, however, does being punished in hell make up for having committed, for example, a murder many lifetimes ago? Every being in hell has a certain amount of evil *karma* that needs to be burned off before a better rebirth can be attained. One can never fully detach oneself from previous actions, since "all intentional actions, good or bad, *matter*; for they leave a trace on the psyche which will lead to future results."⁷⁰

The concept of exhausting one's evil karma supports the idea of impermanence: if one was a serial killer in a previous life, even their life in hell will not be eternal, but only as long as it will take to make up for their evil deeds in the past by burning off all of their evil *karma*. It all reverts back, however, to the concept of every individual being responsible for their previous, current and future life forms. "Essentially the world we live in is our own creation: we have created it by our own *karma*, by our deeds, words, and thoughts motivated either by greed, hatred, and delusion or by nonattachment, friendliness, and wisdom. The cosmos is thus a reflection of our actions, which are in

⁷⁰ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 39

turn the products of our hearts and minds.”⁷¹ Therefore, the evil acts one has committed in this lifetime may not be the only cause for one’s rebirth in hell.

No one can know exactly at what point one’s *karmic* potential has accumulated to a point in which a rebirth in hell awaits. Unable to know how many previous lifetimes one has had, and how bad one’s *karma* is, it is also impossible to know one’s own merit level with any degree of certainty.”⁷² Any following birth could be a birth in hell.

Humans do not know when the time in hell is to come, but are also equally unaware as to how long one will have to remain there. If one action causes another then theoretically, a bad action causes another bad action, and a good one another good one. “All suffering is merely the result of one’s own *karma* and represent its reward.”⁷³

If the outcome of *karma* is a reward, then a rebirth in hell is a reward for bad actions. In this case, if hell is viewed as a reward, why is it considered suffering? Even though the beings are experiencing horrible pain and tortures while in hell, in the big picture they are actually benefiting from their tortures. While they are suffering in one of the hells they are burning off their evil *karma*, which can allow them to have a higher rebirth in a next life. Without making up for their evil deeds, they would only continue to live an increasingly worsening life. Through their punishments in hell they are eliminating their previously accrued *karma* and allowing for new, good *karma* to be accumulated. Therefore, hell beings are actually experiencing a positive rebirth by spending millennia in hell. Spending their inevitable amount of time in hell is the only way they will be able to achieve higher rebirths in the future. Without their time spent

⁷¹ Samyutta Nikāya I, 62

⁷² Penny van Esterik, “Interpreting a Cosmology: Guardian Spirits in Thai Buddhism”, *Anthropos* 1982, p. 12

⁷³ Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Concept of Hell*, Philosophical Library NY, p. 79

in hell, this option would never be open to them again. Therefore, a rebirth in hell is actually not as negative as it may seem.

Permanence and Impermanence

Every individual hell has a specific amount of time that the hell beings must suffer in it. Described in human years, god-realm years and hell-realm years, every deeper or more intense hell has a longer period of suffering. The times of suffering increase exponentially with each hell lasting incalculable years longer than the previous.⁷⁴ Trying to calculate even only the first hell, the *Reviving Hell*, with the least time of suffering added up to a number that the calculator could barely display (exactly 1,642,500,000,000 human years). Patrul Rinpoche also describes the length one must suffer in one of the worse hells, the *Heating Hell*, as follows:

Sixteen hundred human years equal one day among the gods Enjoying the Emanations of Others. Sixty thousand years of these gods correspond to one day in the *Heating Hell*, and beings stay there six thousand of those years.⁷⁵

These immense time periods are completely unimaginable realistically by any human. Instead of taken literally, they serve more as placeholder for eternity. However, since Buddhist teachings heavily rely on the concept of *anitya*, or impermanence, nothing can be categorized as finite. The time spans described with these complex calculations are supposed to give the sense of eternity, while still having the definite of an inevitable end to absolutely everything.

Anitya, or impermanence, is one of the most important concepts of the religious Buddhist teachings. *Anitya* is the explanation for why one will never be truly happy in

⁷⁴ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of My Perfect Teacher*, p. 65

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 65

samsāra, and why a human lifetime is considered so short in relation to the number of rebirths one will experience until hopefully reaching *nirvāṇa*. “Since only *nibbana*⁷⁶ is permanent and all else transient, the unskilled beings who have been swallowed by the earth will one day escape from *Avīci* – a purgatory and not an everlasting hell.”⁷⁷

Nothing in any realm of existence is permanent, and even the hells themselves and the hell-dwellers existence, are impermanent. Viewing hell as a temporary state strengthens the concept of ephemeral existence, whether in hell, human, *deva*, *preta* or animal realm. Furthermore, since “in Buddhist rationality, hells of many types [...] are an integral part of, and organically connected to, the doctrine of *karma* and reincarnation”⁷⁸ impermanence is only highlighted by the ever-changing reincarnation each being will live through.

In Buddhist thought, a single human lifetime is not as significant in relation to time as it seems in the present birth, especially in relation to all the extensive time of our previous and next lives combined. In a Buddhist mindset the current lifetime is a mere fleeting moment that will not be remembered in the future. In fact, it is only an insignificant instant in the innumerable rebirths we live through. Even though in the moment one’s life is everything one has, Buddhists believe that there is more to existence than just this one life that is remembered. Furthermore, since the time humans spend on earth is so short the goal is to do as much good as possible in this limited time. And these good actions will hopefully lead to a better rebirth in the future. The Buddhist view of infinite rebirths, and therefore an infinite existence, makes

⁷⁶ *nibbana* = *nirvāṇa*

⁷⁷ I. B. Horner, “The Earth as a Swallower”, *Artibus Asiae. Supplementum*, Vol. 23 (1966), p. 158

⁷⁸ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 256

individual lifetimes practically insignificant. If there are an infinite number of rebirths to await and an infinite number of lives to live while the universe collapses and reconstructs itself innumerable times, one single life in hell is neither as important nor as long as it seems to a human thinking about his or her lifespan. Viewing life as a mere instance on a time frame of millions and millions of years, less than one hundred years does not have any major significance.

Without understanding the importance of time, one cannot understand what it really means to be born into a hell. One must accept that the experience of this rebirth will only be temporary, even though it might seem like eternity. In regard to permanence versus impermanence, even in a very localized Thai Theravada tradition it is considered that “since even low level *thewada*⁷⁹ live for the equivalent of millions of years, it is not surprising that these spirits are considered permanent.”⁸⁰ As an example of time passing in hell, this excerpt illustrates the passage of time: “for many years, for many a hundred, for many a thousand, many a hundred thousand years he suffered [or: is cooked] in Purgatory [or: hell...].”⁸¹

⁷⁹ *thewada* – Thai Buddhist deity

⁸⁰ Penny van Esterik, “Interpreting a Cosmology: Guardian Spirits in Thai Buddhism”, *Anthropos* 1982, p. 7

⁸¹ stock phrase *passim* in KN, MN, SN, and Vin

Hellish Characteristics: Repetition

Everything in Buddhist hells happens on a repetitive basis. Escape is impossible and the only option is to remain there until released. The repetition that occurs within hell is manifested through the individual punishments of the hell beings. The execution of these tortures is always the same, meaning that once reborn into a specific hell, this hell has one punishment that will always stay the same. Punishments are designed specifically for the individual and the bad *karma* they harvested over their lifetimes. Since all *karma* that has been accumulated is ascribed to only one individual, “if you are here [in hell], you are guilty and you have set in motion the instruments of your own torture.”⁸² Once born into hell the hell beings are bound to experience suffering, and the “beings in the lowest hell realms experience virtually continuous pain and suffering until the results of their actions that brought them there are exhausted.”⁸³

This punishment will last for millennia without interval and is intended to give the evildoer an appropriate retribution. One’s entire time spent in hell is spent in the same place, with the same tortures. Once reborn into a specific hell, the hell being is trapped in this one space for the remainder of their unfortunate rebirth. Even though punishments are short in themselves, they are repeated with immediacy for what seems like an eternity in human perspective. Through the use of this seemingly endless repetition of the same punishment the hell beings are exposed to their evil deeds, only exponentially intensified.

⁸² Charles D. Orzech, *Mechanisms of Violent Retribution in Chinese Hell Narratives*, p. 121

⁸³ Buswell, Jr., Robert E., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Volume One A-L, MacMillan Reference, p. 185

If hell is a punishment, the concept of repetition is used as a torture. Being tortured by various animals and demons is horrible enough, but since the punishments in hell are extremely simple and always stay the same, the agony the hell beings experience in the moment is even worse. The same short whiled torture is repeated innumerable times in identical order and length. The simplicity of the tortures also varies from hell to hell. In some parts of hell the hell beings are sliced apart with saws only to be sealed together again, to be sliced apart again. This is an example of the *Black Line Hell*:

The Black Line Hell

Here *Yama's* henchmen lay their victims out on the ground of burning metal like so many firebrands and cross-rule their bodies with black lines – four, eight, sixteen, thirty-two and so on – which they use as guidelines to cut them up with burning saws. No sooner have their bodies been cut into pieces than they immediately come whole once more, only to be hacked apart over and over again⁸⁴

In other locations animals tear at their vital organs until they die in agony, then being revived instantly to repeat this experience. These short-lived tortures are simplistic and very easy to visualize. Every instance in hell is described in detail and with sound effects:

Ai! The criminals in this hell have all had their eyes dug out and the fresh blood flows [from them], and each of them cries out, their two hands pressing their bloody eye-sockets – truly pitiful! To the left a middle-aged person is just having an eye pulled out by one of the shades; he struggles unceasingly, screaming; his left eye has already been extracted [...].⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of my Perfect Teacher*, p. 64

⁸⁵ *Record of A Journey to Hell [Ti-yu yu-chi]* pp. 56) from Charles D. Orzech, *Mechanisms of Violent Retribution in Chinese Hell Narratives*, p. 111

This excerpt describes in much detail the tortures hell beings must suffer in this hell. Rapidly moving from one description to the next, this short passage is filled with gruesome images that may bring pain and shivers upon the reader. Figure 6 depicts a similar scene as described in the Chinese excerpt, originates, however, from a Japanese image. The fact that tortures and punishments were so similar even across many different traditions and countries supports the notion of Buddhist teachings about hell being universally similar in their methods.



⁸⁶ Figure 6

⁸⁶ Figure 6. <http://bit.ly/14U3CJ1>. February 2013

The Hell of Never Ending Torment - Avīci

Avīci is described as follows: “even bones melt there because of the heat of terrible fire; since there is no intermission for comfort, it is considered as ‘*Avīci*’ – the Hell without Intermission.”⁸⁷ This concept of torture without intermission is present in all Buddhist hells, in *Avīci*, however, it is emphasized and even more gruesome. Since part of the individual’s punishment is to experience their own evil doings, they are constantly exposed to only one form of torture. *Avīci* is the hell that lies deepest within all imagination, encompasses the worst punishments and that lasts the longest. *Avīci* is also called the hell without intermission and sometimes described as a hell with multiple stages. The hell beings move from one hell to the next, each inflicting them with different punishments. *Avīci* is the only hell that has a variety of punishments, which breaks the cycle of repetition before rebirth.

Even though the hell beings *do* experience different tortures, each individual punishment is in turn endured for as long as the previous hells last. Therefore, the hell beings are still subject to the repetition of each punishment for an immeasurable amount of time. These punishments cease when they move on to the next level of *Avīci*, in which they are subject to the next punishment. “*Avīci*, the nethermost of the eight hot hells, is reserved for the most evil beings who must endure excruciating torments there, which though not eternal seem unending as they last for millions of years.”⁸⁸ In a Chinese Buddhist tradition, *Avīci* is described as follows: “According to the Chinese account, the lowest hell is the Wou-kan, the hell without interval (*Avīci*) i.e. without

⁸⁷ Donald Lopez Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin Books

⁸⁸ Keown, Damien, *A Dictionary of Buddhism*, Oxford University Press, p. 243

interval of respite, a place of incessant torment.”⁸⁹ All of these descriptions of *Avīci* conclude that it is the worst hell of all, and that all tortures are inflicted upon the hell beings without interval.

This Buddhist hell tricks its inhabitants by making them think their punishment will finally change. *Avīci*, being the most gruesome of all hells, also deceives them by changing their repetitive punishments. Even in the change, however, the punishments they *do* receive are incessant. The following story describes the *Neighboring Hells*. These hells surround *Avīci* in all directions and are the final stages of this hell, serving as the ultimate and final punishment.

The Neighboring Hells

Around the Hell of Ultimate Torment, in each of the four cardinal directions, there is a ditch of flaming embers, a marsh of rotting corpses, a plain of bristling weapons and a forest of trees with razor-edged leaves. There is one of each in the north, south, east and west, making sixteen in all. In each of the intermediate directions – the southeast, southwest, northwest and northeast – stands a hill of iron *shalmali*⁹⁰ trees.

Describing the surroundings of *Avīci*, there is a multitude of gruesome and gross prospects in every direction imaginable. This encompassing of all directions or escape routes makes the prospect of leaving *Avīci* seem ever so much more difficult and impossible. Exponentially increasing in number, these sub-hells surrounding the hell of ultimate torment make *Avīci* not only more terrifying due to sheer size and time spent there, but also because it seems never-ending. This introduction leads into detailed examples of five of the sixteen *Neighboring Hells*:

⁸⁹ B.C. Law, *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*, p. 94

⁹⁰ *shalmali* tree – silk cotton tree, also used as an ayurvedic herb

The pit of hot embers. When beings have purged most of the effects of actions connected with the Hell of Ultimate Torment (*Avīci*) and emerge from it, they see, far away in the distance, what looks like a shady trench. They leap into it with delight, only to find themselves sinking down into a pit of blazing embers which burn their flesh and bones.

Deceiving the hell beings into thinking their torments are over is a part of *Avīci*. The pit of hot embers is the first instance that references happiness in hell. The hell beings' delight about salvation into a shady trench suggests that they may experience feelings of happiness. Soon thereafter, however, these hopes are crushed again. Instead of relief, they are tortured repeatedly to experience the intense suffering of flesh and even bones burning.

The swamp of putrescent corpses. Then they see a river. Having been roasted in a brazier for a whole *kalpa*, they are so thirsty that seeing water fills them with joy and they rush towards it to quench their thirst. But of course there is no water. There is nothing but corpses – corpses of men, corpses of horses, corpses of dogs – all decomposing and crawling with insects as they decompose, giving off the foulest of stench. They sink into this mire until their heads go under, while worms with iron beaks devour them.

The second time the hell beings experience thoughts of happiness and the prospect of escape is also eradicated by another torture. The hope of finally escaping *Avīci* ends in yet another sinking of hope, and the sinking of the hell beings. The gory imagery created in this excerpt serves to frighten and scare the reader not only through text, but also through visualization. These descriptions aim at creating a visceral experience and perception of these hells. The worms with iron beaks are an added torture, increasing the level of suffering and pain.

The plain of razors. When they emerge from this swamp, they are thrilled to see a pleasant green plain. But when they get there they find

that it is bristling with weapons. The whole ground is covered with slender blades of burning hot metal growing like grass, which pierce their feet with each step, the wounds healing as each foot is lifted again.

An important point to note is that even though the hell beings think their predicted time in hell has past, in actuality, it has not. Therefore, even though the hell beings think what lies ahead of them is salvation, in reality it is a mere continuation of hell. This disappointment of heading toward a positive place ahead of them is also a part of the punishment the beings must endure. The repetition of punishment is illustrated by 'the wounds healing as each foot is lifted again', which shows the incessant repetition of pain and torment.

The forest of swords. Once again free, they rejoice to see a beautiful forest and rush towards it. But when they get there, the beautiful forest turns out to be a thicket whose trees have swords growing on their metal branches instead of leaves. As they stir in the wind, the swords cut those beings' bodies into little pieces. Their bodies reconstitute themselves and are chopped up over and over again.

This section focuses even more on the repetitive nature of Buddhist hell, and how one simple punishment can be so gruesome and torturous. The image of something very familiar, a tree swaying in the wind, is taken out of a peaceful context and replaced with the agonizing pain of being sliced into little pieces. For the Buddhist reader these images are relatable while still serving as a didactic tool to deter from bad behavior.

The hill of iron shalmali trees. It is here that loose monks and nuns who have broken their vows of chastity and people who give themselves over to the foot of the terrifying hill of iron *shalmali* trees. At the top they can see their former lovers calling them. As they climb eagerly up to join them, all the leaves of the iron trees point downward and pierce their flesh. When they reach the top, they find ravens, vultures, and the like that dig out their eyes to suck up the fat. Again they see their friends calling them, now from the foot of the hill. Down they go, and

the leaves turn upward, stabbing them through the chest again and again. *Once they get down to the ground, hideous metallic men and women embrace them, biting off their heads and chewing them until the brains trickle out of the corners of their mouths.*⁹¹

This particular section of the *Neighboring Hells* strikes me as the most shocking, disturbing, yet also very important. It refers to punishment due to unchastely behavior, something most people have engaged in. Since this behavior is so common, it is a very likely future for the majority of people. In Figure 7 hell beings are depicted climbing these razor blade speckled trees while also harassed by other creatures. Creating a space in hell that is directly oriented towards such common bad merit suggests that everyone will pass through this section of hell eventually. The prospect of experiencing these emotions of longing and then not only disappointment, but this extreme intensity of torture serves to deter people from following these desires in their current life times. It can be argued that the prospect of a torment of this capacity in a following reincarnation could have been reason enough *not* to engage in unchaste behavior.

⁹¹ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of my Perfect Teacher*, pp. 66-67



⁹² Figure 7

⁹² Figure 7, <http://bit.ly/13mIKJt>, April 2013

The final sentence from this passage, “hideous metallic men and women embrace them [the hell beings], biting off their heads and chewing them until the brains trickle out of the corners of their mouths” aims to create unparalleled images of terror in the reader’s imagination. The futuristic idea of metallic humans is very interesting, and the image of these robot-like creatures devouring someone’s brain is an image that stays with the reader. These insights into hell may have been used to create a type of caution in the devout Buddhist reader. If these images and texts were widely understood through teachings, the knowledge of these punishments for certain actions could deter people from committing them.

Chapter Two

Location***A Hell of a Location***

Having a plethora of hells also gives rise to the question of space and location. Where are all these hells located? The hell's location is either described as being in a very logical and precise order, or like a building, from top to bottom⁹³ or in a circle surrounded by *Yama*⁹⁴ or scattered in multiple locations. The concept of hell existing below or inside earth where it is hot and fiery is reminiscent of the earth opening itself to receive hell-dwellers from above. These people's *karmic* potential was so bad they were instantly received into *Avīci*. It is said that the earth can no longer bear the weight of the evil deeds these people have committed. As in this story,

The compact earth, *ghanapathavi*, unable to sustain King Mahapatapa's (Devadatta⁹⁵) evil qualities of jealousy and anger, split asunder, formed a fissure. A flame shooting up, *utthāya*, from *Avīci*, wrapping him around [...] taking him, plunged him, *hipi*, into *Avīci*.⁹⁶

This story about Devadatta's entrance into *Avīci* shows how hell does in some cases manifest itself on, or in, earth itself. Instead of later reincarnation, Devadatta was

⁹³ Patrul Rinpoche, *The Words of my Perfect Teacher*, p. 64

⁹⁴ N. W. Thomas, *A Buddhist Wheel of Life from Japan*, image

⁹⁵ *Devadatta* – Devadatta was a cousin of the Buddha who entered the Order and gained supernormal powers of the mundane plane (*puthujjana-iddhi*). Later, however, he began to harbor thoughts of jealousy and ill will toward his kinsman, the Buddha. (http://www.buddhanet.net/e-learning/buddhism/bud_lt28.htm, April 2013)

⁹⁶ Horner, I. B., "The Earth as a Swallower", *Artibus Asiae*, Supplementum, Vol. 23, pp. 157 also Ja. No. 358, vol. iii, p. 177ff

instantly wrapped up by flames and plunged into *Avīci*. Other stories about Devadatta exist, describing his plummeting in to the earth:

Devadatta got up and put both feet on the ground: they entered the earth, *pathavim pavisimsu*, to be followed in turn by his ankles, knees, hips, breast and neck. When his jaw-bone was resting on the ground he spoke a stanza declaring that he took Refuge in the Buddha.⁹⁷ [...] For only if he died as a monk could he, whatever the weight of his *kamma*, have something to hope for after his eons of torment in *Avīci* were over. For he entered the earth and was reborn in *Avīci*, the Great Niraya.⁹⁸

This story paints a picture of Devadatta slowly sinking into the bare earth as if through quick sand. Only in the last moments of his earthly existence does he take refuge in the Buddha to lessen his punishment even if only slightly. The place humans dwell on, earth, is just another part of the universe, one of many regions and realms in space. This correlates directly to the idea that hell beings inhabit hell.⁹⁹ Setting humans and hell beings on a similar level of inhabiting a certain space makes them less unique and more a mere part of a larger system of multiple realms and multiple spaces to inhabit.

The image of the earth splitting open and emitting hell-fire from within the core is very powerful and memorable: “The great earth, splitting open or bursting asunder, *bhijjiva*, formed a fissure, a cleft, a chasm, or gaven an opening, *vivaram adasi*. A flame shot up, *utthahi*, from *Avīci* and she (a brahman¹⁰⁰ girl) [...] was reborn there.”¹⁰¹ The

⁹⁷ Refuge in the Buddha – to take refuge in the Buddha means to take refuge in the Buddha, the *dharma* and the *sangha*. These three are also called the three jewels.

⁹⁸ Horner, I. B., “The Earth as a Swallower”, *Artibus Asiae*, Supplementum, Vol. 23, p. 155, also (Ap. P. 300; ApA. 121ff. DhA. i. 147ff)

⁹⁹ B.C. Law, *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*, p. 102

¹⁰⁰ *Brahman* – the Absolute, essence of the universe. A god; inhabitant of the heavens of form or formlessness. A state to be attained through the practice of *dhyāna* and the development of the four “Brahma viharas” (Sublime Attitudes): goodwill, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity (Robinson, Richard H. and Johnson, Willard L. *The Buddhist Religion*. Wadsworth Publishing Company).

image of the earth splitting open and emitting hell-fire from within, sucking the evil-doer into the core creates a visual experience for the reader that is terrifying and unforgettable. The intensity of the image of being engulfed by the earth for one's bad actions is supposed to act as a means to deter people from committing bad actions. Instead of using only types of shock and fear inducing stories in order to deter people from doing bad things, Buddhism also has these very visual means to encourage accruing good merit.

Earth is just another part of the universe, one of many regions and realms in space. There are exceptions to gods or demi-gods living on earth, such as His Holiness the Dalai Lama, the reincarnation of the *bodhisattva*¹⁰² of compassion that lives amongst humans. Gods and other beings are not bound to a rebirth on earth, whereas humans and animals are. Referring to the earth as “the region inhabited by man,” suggests that there are a multitude of regions, not all inhabited by man or animals. Interestingly, “unlike the South Asian prototypes, Chinese hells appear to be modeled on the imperial bureaucracy and administered by a hellish staff (see Figure 8). The ‘court’ layout often major and numerous subsidiary hells mimic Chinese palace and temple architecture.”¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Horner, I. B., “The Earth as a Swallower”, *Artibus Asiae*, Supplementum, Vol. 23, p. 153, also DhA. Iii. 178; the Introduction to Jataka No. 472

¹⁰² *bodhisattva* – a future Buddha (Sanskrit; Pali: *bodhisatta*): a being who is to become enlightened. These beings have taken a special vow to continue being reborn into *samsāra* rather than entering *nirvāṇa* in order to help others rid themselves from their suffering by aiding the attainment of enlightenment.

¹⁰³ Charles D. Orzech, *Mechanisms of Violent Retribution in Chinese Hell Narratives*, p. 112



¹⁰⁴ Figure 8

¹⁰⁴ Figure 8. <http://bit.ly/10gvtdl>. April 2013

Another very different idea is that Buddhist hells only exist in the mental spheres of every individual. This idea of Buddhist hells located within the imagination of the human realm could change their perception of being physically integrated into the universe. The idea of hell not only existing in different locations after death, but also in the present state, further allows people to view hell differently. Hell being a construction of the mind could mean that one can enter but also exit hell in one single lifetime on earth.

From the time of earliest Buddhism, rebirth was seen both as a process which takes place after death, and also as a process taking place during life. That is, we are constantly changing during life, 'reborn' as a 'different' person according to our mood, the task we are involved in, or the people we are relating to. Depending on how we act, we may experience 'heavenly' or 'hellish' states of mind.¹⁰⁵

This ability to create and destroy the personal hell gives immense power to the individual. By being one's personal ruler, punisher and punished, hell can last as long or short as the individual chooses. Perceptions of hell change vastly if they are not up to a higher force. In Buddhism, this force is *karma*. Hell, governed by the mind of the individual rather than the universal concept of *karma*, may allow for the elimination of the need for endless rebirths and burning off evil *karma* in hell. Different Buddhist traditions, such as Mahayana¹⁰⁶ and Theravada¹⁰⁷, view this question of the location of the actual hell very differently. Structurally, all types of hell are possible scenarios. If it

¹⁰⁵ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 45

¹⁰⁶ *Mahayana* – (Sanskrit): literally, 'great vehicle', a term used by proponents of *sūtras* that began to appear some four centuries after the death of the Buddha and which were regarded by them as the word of the Buddha. The term has come to mean by extension those forms of Buddhism (today located for the most part in Tibet, China, Korea and Japan) that base their practice on the *sūtras* (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*).

¹⁰⁷ *Theravada* – (Pali): literally, 'School of the Elders', a branch of the Indian Stharivarada school that was established in Sri Lanka in the third century BCE. In the eleventh century CE the *Theravada* became the dominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*)

is accepted that the hells could be located anywhere, then it must also be accepted that they could be located in the mind. Some states of mind can be as abstract as the Mahayana tradition buddhafiels¹⁰⁸ such as the Pure Land¹⁰⁹ Buddhist idea of the Pure Land that may possibly only exist in the individual's imagination.

From a more physical Buddhist view, it is understood that “the universe consists of many world earths, heavens and hells, and each system or sphere is divided into three regions.”¹¹⁰ In more detail:

In the tripartite model, the lowest and most earthly of the three spheres is known as the ‘sphere of sense-desires’ (*kamavacara*¹¹¹), and includes all of the realms up to the sixth heaven above the human world. Next is the ‘sphere of pure form’ (*rupavacara*¹¹²), a rarefied spiritual space in which the gods perceive and communicate by a kind of telepathy. [...] Highest of all is the ‘sphere of formlessness’ (*arupavacara*¹¹³), a state without material shape of form (*rupa*¹¹⁴) in which beings exist as pure mental energy.¹¹⁵

Centrally located in the Wheel of Existence held up by *Yama*, hell is as important a part of life in *samsāra* as the human realm. Sectioned and separated on the Wheel of Existence, all cycles of life are constantly repeated. Every section of the wheel is devoted to a form of rebirth in the realms of *samsāra*. By placing the rebirth in hell in a

¹⁰⁸ buddhafiels – a Buddha's sphere of influence

¹⁰⁹ Pure Land Buddhism – also referred to as a Buddha-field, the domain that a Buddha creates as an ideal setting for the practice of the *dharma*. In the *Mahayana* the pure land is considered a form of paradise (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*).

¹¹⁰ B. C. Law, *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*, p. 93

¹¹¹ *kamavacara* – (Pali; Sanskrit: *kamadhatu*): Desire Realm, the lowest of the three realms (the others being the Form Realm and the Formless Realm) in Buddhist cosmology, populated (in ascending order) by hell beings, ghosts, animals, humans, demigods and gods. (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*)

¹¹² *rupavacara* – (Pali; Sanskrit: *rupadhatu*): in Buddhist cosmology a realm of heavens above the Desire Realm reserved for those who attain certain states of deep concentration in their previous life (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*).

¹¹³ *arupavacara* – (Pali; Sanskrit: *arupyadhatu*): in Buddhist cosmology, the highest realm within the cycle of rebirth where beings exist as deep states of concentration. Like the Form Realm, it is reserved for those who achieve those states in their previous life. (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*)

¹¹⁴ *rupa* – material form

¹¹⁵ Keown, Damien, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 250

specific location on the Wheel of Existence, one can picture it, and through its many representations in art, visualize some of what awaits in a future rebirth. “The earliest extant pictorial representation of the wheel is at *Ajanta*;¹¹⁶ it was developed especially in Tibetan Buddhist art, where the wheel was often conspicuously painted in monastery vestibules or on hanging scrolls used for meditation.”¹¹⁷ The Wheel represents all possible life forms and various natural cycles of reincarnation. “As the wheel of *saṃsāra* moves around, beings migrate through the various domains in accordance with their *karma*, or the good and evil deeds committed in each rebirth.”¹¹⁸

Viewing hell as merely another realm of rebirth rather than a very distant place unrelated with the cycle of rebirth makes it seem less unfair or unlikely to be reborn into. Since it is located adjacent to both the human and animal realms, one can roughly picture where it could be located. Interestingly, however, this visualization in a physical or geographical sense of location is not supposed to imply that the realm of hell is actually located in between humans and animals. It is located on the bottom of the wheel, which suggests that it is the lowest of all realms.

¹¹⁶ Ajanta – the Ajanta caves, located in the Aurangabad district of Maharashtra, India, house some of the first Buddhist paintings and sculptures

¹¹⁷ Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, Wadsworth Publishing Company, p. 20

¹¹⁸ Keown, Damien, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 246

Fluidity of an Imagined Location

There are many descriptions and interpretations of the realm of hell, most very similar in the way the hell-dwellers are being punished, but very different in terms of the description of hell's location. Buddhist hell is so vague in its concept of location that almost any description of a location can be accurate. Different Buddhist traditions place hell in different locations, both physical and metaphysical. There are upward of sixteen hells, and since they are not all in one space, there is not a single specific place to which they can be prescribed to. Some descriptions do not give any guidelines as to where the hells could be located, creating the possibility of a space in the mind of the reader, allowing for the imagination to be the ruler of where this hell is taking place. Unlike other religious traditions, the Buddhist hell is not fixed to one location below earth in its fiery pits, it is not even a singular hell. Buddhist hell can be imagined as an undefined place of punishments and pains that seem endless but as everything else, do end eventually.

Thinking about these individual hells in different locations broadens the perspective on hells in general. Instead of limiting their existence to one single location in space, the Buddhist hells are so versatile that even if one does not know how to visualize them in this life, the perfect hell for everyone does exist. A hell that fits exactly to everyone's evil *karma* exists somewhere out there; whether it is hot or cold, scary or painful, or even just imaginary. A part of what can create more dis-ease is not knowing *which* hell one is condemned to be reborn into. Before actually there, which is unfortunately inevitable, one can only speculate. Some may be more invested in

thinking about their future lives than others, but everyone does wonder at some point: what comes next? Sometimes the concept of hell in other religions may not cause as much discomfort to think about as the Buddhist one because it is not as much of a mystery. In the Buddhist hell, nothing is predictable, not even its location. In Figure 9 the section of hell of the Wheel of Existence is depicted. The lowest of all realms, here the hell beings are punished, chased and burned by demons and hell fire. The punishments are very varied since this depiction does not focus on one specific hell.



119 Figure 9

¹¹⁹ Figure 9. Detail. *Wheel of Existence*. Tibet, 19th century. Pigments on cloth. C2006.66.131, HAR,78. Rubin Museum of Art, New York City

In Buddhism the existence of multiple universes and realms is a common concept and in fact, “Buddhist cosmological notions are much more in line with those of modern astronomy in the way the latter envisages the scale and extent of the cosmos.”¹²⁰ The possibility of placing the hells in locations so distant literally unimaginable to humans puts a certain distance between these hells and the human birth. This, in turn, allows the texts describing hells to be the primary agents in creating this imaginary world for the reader. The vastness of possible location in separate universes is paralleled by a very clear and organized description of what and how the hells are organized. The precise locations are left so vague while the exact punishments are described in impeccable detail. It seems as if nothing is left to chance in some of the descriptions of individual punishments, whereas the location of these punishments are occurring is not mentioned.

A possible explanation can be that even though these hells are considered real and are bound to happen, their location cannot be pinpointed because every individual is personally responsible for creating their own hell. Every individual’s hell is so specific and only applies to that one person, that it is not possible to prescribe a certain type of hell to a single, all encompassing location for all. Buddhist hells could be located in any part of the known and unknown universe, but also in a mental universe or right here on, or inside, earth. Since hell is such a personal experience, even though sometimes one is condemned to enter a specific hell, its location could still be as fluid as the imagination of it.

¹²⁰ Keown, Damien, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 245

Depiction of Hell as a Prison

“The Buddhist hells, the prison of the lost, are in some cases situated underneath the region inhabited by man.”¹²¹ Even “the Chinese term for hell, *diyu* (地狱) translates as ‘subterranean prison.’”¹²² Describing the Buddhist hells as a prison provides a clear and distinct image of hell in human diction. Imagining hell as a prison is a powerful way in which to comprehend the concept. Since everyone knows what a prison is and what it may look like, describing the hells as something everyone can relate to may just function as a visual aid for the layman. A prison is a confinement, one that cannot be escaped from. Similarly, hell is a type of confinement that has no exits except reincarnation. Thinking about hell as a prison emphasizes the idea that one cannot escape this place, cannot leave until due time has been served. Furthermore, comparing hell to a prison suggests that it is not only up to the individual to be sent there, but that there are outside guiding forces that play a role as well. Even though there is no individual or collection of deities that makes decisions about who goes to hell and who does not, one’s actions in life create a judgment in themselves which is the deciding factor about where someone will be reborn.

Leaving hell is a very *karmically* structured process, and “beings in the lowest hell realms experience virtually continuous pain and suffering until the results of their actions that brought them there are exhausted.”¹²³ Breaking out of prison is usually futile, the attempts still always exist even though almost no one manages to escape

¹²¹ cited from B.C. Law, *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*, p. 104

¹²² Buswell, Jr., Robert E., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Volume One A-L, MacMillan Reference, p. 318

¹²³ Ibid. p. 185

successfully. As from hell, an escape seems vain since the breakout would not just be from a building with guards, but from an entire rebirth in an unknown location with unknown obstacles. Fleeing from a Buddhist hell is not a common concept. Surprisingly, however, the idea does get mentioned. There is one short section in Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of my Perfect Teacher* in which a burning building is described from which it would be impossible to flee¹²⁴ or from a Tibetan Jataka¹²⁵ tale, as "an iron house without doors."¹²⁶ The notion of fleeing, therefore, does exist. The manifestation of hell is so deep that its escape is not really a plausible thought.

Being condemned into this prison by one's own actions that caused the accumulation of evil *karma* is the only fair way to make up for these deeds and clean the slate in order to have the ability to accrue good *karma*. All actions have repercussions and will affect one's future birth. The difficulty in Buddhism, however, is that no matter what one does, a birth in hell is always inevitable. It is often thought that one can avoid hell by not killing or lying, or even being vegetarian, but it is much more complex than that. Even if one eats nothing but plain rice for their entire life, the insects killed by tilling, plowing and watering the rice fields are losses large enough to qualify for a birth in hell. With the knowledge that no matter how well one behaves, the mere act of being alive is enough to be reborn into hell. To survive in *samsāra* we must eat and drink, which inevitably causes the death of some animal or insect.

Which hell one is condemned to relies on the larger accumulation of sins and mistakes that were committed in one's lifetimes. There are a plethora of different types

¹²⁴ Patrul Rinpoche's *The Words of my Perfect Teacher*, p. 65

¹²⁵ *Jataka tales* – stories about the previous lives of the Buddha

¹²⁶ Wenzel, H. "A Jataka-Tale from the Tibetan", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, New Series, Vol. 20, No. 4 (Oct., 1888), p. 505

of hells, some for lying and stealing, some for hurting other humans and animals, and many others¹²⁷. According to what one's crimes were in previous lives, even if these crimes seem negligible to some, the individual will be assigned to a specific hell in which to suffer for nearly eternity. Figure 10 shows the scene of demons boiling hell beings in huge vats of boiling metal while continuously stabbing them. This punishment is inflicted due to previous bad merit and serves as a didactic tool to scare the reader.

¹²⁷ Charles D. Orzech, *Mechanisms of Violent Retribution in Chinese Hell Narratives*, p. 111



¹²⁸ Figure 10

¹²⁸ Figure 10. <http://bit.ly/14U41eu>. April 2013

Residents of Hell

There exists the idea that hell beings “inhabit hell”.¹²⁹ Thinking of inhabitation suggests that it is more or less permanent. It is greatly different than suggesting that humans *move* to hell, since moving implies also *moving on* in the future. Once one inhabits a space, moving is less likely. Letting hell beings inhabit hell gives them an interesting power over the space. They are not just considered visitors, they live there, hell is *their* space. At the same time, however, they are completely stripped of any type of power because they are subjects to their punishments, punishers and mental agonies. Setting humans and hell beings on a similar level of inhabiting a certain space makes them less special and more a mere part of a larger system of multiple realms and multiple spaces to inhabit. As humans and animals inhabit the earth, hell beings inhabit hell.

According to one Buddhist dictionary, hells are described as “places located under the earth that are typified by extreme physiological and/or psychological suffering.”¹³⁰ The idea of having an entire realm of existence dedicated solely to torment shows how important this realm of existence is for Buddhists. Not only is it described in utmost detail in scriptures, but the placement of an entire realm for hell shows that it is a substantial part of existence for all living beings and can not be neglected in importance. “A place of torment” triggers an image of horror, a place of pain and torture without happiness. This place has the purpose of creating fear and reverence in the

¹²⁹ B.C. Law, *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*, p. 102

¹³⁰ Prebish, Charles S. *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism*. The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, NJ & London 1993. p. 137

reader. Being reborn in such a realm and being exposed and forced to experience nothing but torment for an incalculable period of time does not allow space or time for anything positive. For the Buddhist reader these stories, images and descriptions of hell mean more than just an unlucky rebirth; they embody the cycle of *samsāra*. By being alive on this earth, they are part of the cycle through never ending reincarnations. Being Buddhist also means understanding these rebirths, while simultaneously having faith that the next rebirth will be more positive. Generally speaking, “the names of the various hells denote suffering and torture, expressive of the torture going on there when *kamma* is ‘matured’ or, literally, ‘boiled’ (Pali: *paccati*) – implying on the one hand that the sufferer is purified of his bad deeds, but also playing on the word to indicate that boiling is part of the torture.”¹³¹

The Buddhist universe is comprised of many different life forms and various states of existence. According to the *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism*, “the universe is divided into three realms, the *kamadhatu* or ‘Realm of Desire’, *rupadhatu* or ‘Realm of Form’, and *arupadhatu* or ‘Formless Realms.’”¹³² Each level, or layer, is labeled in terms of how humans interact with the “realm of desire (*kama*)” which refers to the realm of *karma*. One’s own *karmic actions* and potential accumulates over time and innumerable rebirths. As our *karmic actions* dictate our physical rebirths the realm of *karma* is that in which we accumulate our *karmic potential*. Both humans and animals can accumulate good and bad *karma*. *Karma*, however, is larger than the current lifetime, “*karma* does not just bring results in the next life: an action is said to have effects later in the present

¹³¹ Braarvig, Jens. *Numen 56*: “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” Brill 2009. p. 264

¹³² Prebish, Charles S., *Historical Dictionary of Buddhism*, The Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, NJ & London 1993, p. 97

life, the next life, and also in some subsequent ones.”¹³³ All human experience dictates circumstances, and everything that happens is no coincidence, but predestined by *karma*.

Secondly, there is the “realm of matter or material form (*rupa*)” which refers to the realm’s physical existence. So much in life, in *samsāra*, is dictated by attachments, both emotionally and physically. Realizing that the realm of matter is just another realm, not any more of a reality, should help lessen attachments. Humans are bound to experience suffering if continuously attached to material or living things. Since nothing is permanent, everything one becomes attached to will eventually disappear, causing inevitable pain. This cycle of never being able to escape *duḥkha* is as much part of *samsāra* as hell itself. The third realm, “the realm without form (*arupa*)” refers to realms without physical presence. This state is just before enlightenment, and therefore *nirvāṇa* is attained. Only in that state can one finally let go of all attachments and be released from the endless cycle of rebirth into *samsāra*. One of the goals and rewards for being eliminated from this cycle is the end to rebirths in hell. “*Nirvāṇa* is the unconditioned, the deathless, beyond space and time, known directly at the moment of enlightenment.”¹³⁴ Once released from endless *duḥkha* in *samsāra*, and the ultimate reward of finally reaching *nirvāṇa* is being free from earthly or universal attachments.

It is suggested that the different realms of existence and non-existence are *each* divided into three regions. Does this mean, that in each earth, heaven and hell there exist all three realms of desire, material form and no-form? Each realm of existence is divided into *three* separate layers. These three layers of existence therefore do not only

¹³³ Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 41

¹³⁴ Buswell, Jr., Robert E., *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Volume One A-L, MacMillan Reference, p. 186

exist in the human and animal realms, but also in the realms of hell. Could this mean, that in the realm of hell, there exists a layer in which *nirvāṇa* can be attained? Viewing each realm of existence as so separate from one another that each has the possibility to be reborn out of but also reach *nirvāṇa* is not a common concept in writings about the Buddhist hell. Like everything else, hell is not eternal but has an end in sight. Therefore the slight chance of attaining immediate *nirvāṇa* instead of another rebirth from hell exists.

The Mind as a Location

The theory that the hells, instead of being located in a physical space, are actually only existent in the mind relates to every day situations. In daily life one hears people referencing hell in various ways. It can be emotionally, situational or physical. This concept of hell only existent in places created in the mind is fascinating. Having the power to enter, or not enter, a hell is up to the individual. As everyone has experienced, however, it is not easy to escape the mental hell because the individual's mind knows best how to trick the self into sadness and unpleasant thoughts. One creates a mental hell in daily life, sometimes more intense than at other times.

If all hells are only mental and created in the mind, then one *does* have the possibility to reach *nirvāṇa* in the same lifetime one experiences hell in. The imagination about hell can be fully metaphysical, which can also allow stepping in and out of it on one's own accord. Even though leaving hell might not happen in a single day, through personal growth and time one does have the power to escape and move on. Therefore, if one has experienced hell in a lifetime, the mental hell of repetition and fear, then technically also the ability to move so far as to reach *nirvāṇa* in the same life exists. Previously all emphasis was placed on the future rebirth and that all existence must pass through hell eventually. With the notion of hell possibly being part of every lifetime in the present, many new possibilities arise about how to interpret Buddhist concepts of life and death.

Chapter Three

Community***Animals and Vengeance***

Someone who has mistreated animals in their human birth, will in turn be mistreated by animals in hell, or receive the same treatment the animals received. The *Crushing Hell*, mentioned earlier, is another representation of actions in the human lifetime directly influencing one's punishments in hell. Some hells are directly related to animal abuse. This excerpt is directed to the mistreatments of dogs: "Two dogs *Sabala* and *Sama* of giant size, mighty and strong, devour with their iron teeth him who is driven hence and goes to another world."¹³⁵

Referenced in a relatively modern Chinese text about hell, the punishment of the hell being is being directly compared to the slaughter of an animal:

Ai-yah! ... Each of the criminals is bound to an iron pillar and the ox-headed demons are in the process of administering punishment – using iron copper blades they peel the skin of the person's face, just as a butcher kills a pig and then flays it. Each of the criminal ghosts screams in pain [...].¹³⁶

These intense textual images cause visceral reactions in the reader. The punishment in this case directly refers back to the actions of humans towards animals. Instilling very vivid, scary and gruesome images into the reader's imagination serves as a tool to deter them from accruing bad *karma* in the future. Even though the text

¹³⁵ Ja IV.124-25

¹³⁶ *Record of A Journey to Hell [Ti-yu yu-chi]* pp. 56) cited in Charles D. Orzech, *Mechanisms of Violent Retribution in Chinese Hell Narratives*, p. 111

described here is from Chinese origin, these images, Figure 11 (Thailand) and Figure 12 (Japan) both also show the tortures of being skinned. In Figure 11 animals can be seen in the background, watching as the hell beings are punished. Figure 13 depicts the exact course of action and according punishment. This hell being is being punished due to their mistreatment of animals in previous lives, and is now being shown which bad *karma* brought them to their current state. The only way to burn off this evil *karma* is to suffer the same tortures previously inflicted onto others. Besides demons in many shapes and forms, many hells reference animals with metallic body parts causing immense suffering: “a pair of large birds, whose function is to tear at the vitals of the sufferers with their metallic beaks.”¹³⁷ The birds’ only purpose is never ending and robotic, they continue to fulfill their tasks until the hell being is reincarnated. Once they are reborn, another hell being will take their place and experience the same tortures.

¹³⁷ A. B. Griswold, “A Warning to Evildoers”, *Artibus Asiae*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1957), p. 27



¹³⁸ Figure 11

¹³⁸ Figure 11. <http://bit.ly/L6FUMQ>. April 2013



¹³⁹ Figure 12

¹³⁹ Figure 12, <http://bit.ly/1753VhD>, April 2013



¹⁴⁰ Figure 13

¹⁴⁰ Figure 13, <http://bit.ly/11AfFpX>, January 2013

Punishment and Release

Animals and demons are only in place to fulfill one single role of torture. Their movements and action always stay the same. According to some, however, these demons and guards are not actually responsible for the hell-dwellers torments: “you only are responsible for your own suffering – don’t blame the gaolers, they are only doing their duty.”¹⁴¹ The hell beings know their punishers and what to expect once revived again. Knowing what waits as punishment might be even worse than oblivion because not one second can be lived without either experiencing the pain or anticipating it.

The reasoning behind these awful tortures is that only through the burning off of this evil *karma* can the ‘*karma*-slate’ be cleared. Being tormented with the same tortures repeatedly has a certain type of agency within the major punishment. The torture that is experienced besides the actual physical pain becomes mental. If these tortures are mental, this could suggest that the entire experience of hell could *all* be metaphysical. If the hell being can remember their tortures from one revival to the next, their mental state as well as their physical state is demolished, which leads to both physical and mental agony. Comparing the repetition of punishments in hell to simple annoying things in everyday life can help illuminate how their tortures without intermission may affect the hell dwellers. Imagining someone clicking on a pen gets annoying even after only a short period of time. The prospect of someone clicking on a pen for millions of years, however, would lead to insanity through extreme mental

¹⁴¹ Charles D. Orzech, *Mechanisms of Violent Retribution in Chinese Hell Narratives*, p. 124

stress. When the harmless, painless clicking of a pen is replaced with birds pecking at one's vital organs with metal beaks, this agony is exponentially increased.

Hell's characteristic of letting the damned suffer only one single punishment for the entire time spent in hell is almost as horrible of a punishment as suffering in hell at all. Besides the fact that the punishments themselves are terrifying, the familiar distress of the repetition of basically anything on such a scale is supposed to deter people from accumulating evil *karma*. The repetition experienced in hell leads to both physical and mental deterioration of the sufferer, making their original suffering incalculably worse. The hell beings may be aware of what awaits them as soon as they are revived which causes for a different type of pain and anxiety in contrast to having different torment inflicted on them all the time.

If hell is equally a part of life's existence as earth, why is it so much more gruesome than the human or animal form? It can be argued that the hell realms are gruesome, but not always worse than what can be experienced in other realms. Each of the six realms of existence has instances of extreme suffering that may seem like hell in the present state. For example, a person dying of starvation, freezing to death or burning alive is actually experiencing *preta* existence or hell in their current lifetime. At the same time, very lucky individuals may be experiencing god-like happiness on earth.¹⁴² Furthermore, even if not every individual on earth is experiencing hell, there are beings that are at all times. The mistreatment of animals and people is like hell for the one's involved. Technically the concept of butchering and meat preparation can be regarded as hell. The animals being sliced apart and cut into pieces by the butchers are

¹⁴² Interview with Lama Tenzin, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY. April 4th 2013

actually in hell at that time. In another life time, these butchers will therefore have to suffer the same punishments they previously inflicted onto others (see Figure 13).

In Buddhism, *samsāra* is suffering. Hell could be seen as a more extreme version of the daily sufferings we experience on earth. Since *anitya* is the basic principle of impermanence in Buddhism, the lack of permanence in our existence on earth could be made up by permanence in hell. Being constantly torn and suffering on earth due to our never-ending attachments is the most basic Buddhist teaching. Attachment and suffering, *anitya* and *dukkha*, are the first of the Four Noble Truths in Buddhist teachings. They state that all life is suffering, and suffering is caused by attachment. Humans develop emotions for other living beings and material objects, which results in attachment to these things. Once they are taken away, lost, leave or die, the attachment that was built up over time results in suffering due to the loss.

This attachment is taken to the extreme in hell. The sufferer is forced to experience extreme attachment through their punishments. Not letting go of things and being a slave to the faulty human nature of attachment is punished in hell by being overly attached, not able to detach from one's punishments. The punished in hell have become so attached to their torments that they will never leave them. This extreme version of attachment could serve to emphasize how awful attachment can really be. The twofold purpose of hell in this case, both burning off evil *karma* and teaching a lesson about attachment is implemented through the extensiveness of these punishments and their never-ending repetitions.

Occupants of Hell

Hell beings are always tortured and massacred by demons or animals. These creatures are often portrayed as half animal and half man. These demons are described and depicted torturing the hell beings (see Figure 14, a half-animal demon). There are other interpretations, however, in which the “*Andhakas*¹⁴³ suppose that there are no guards in hell charged with torturing and punishing; rather, these torturers are nothing but the bad actions themselves, committed in the shape of hell-keepers who purge the sufferers.”¹⁴⁴ Sometimes, they are the ones that cause the hell beings pain by puncturing them, sawing them (Figure 15), and ripping them apart.

¹⁴³ *Andhakas*

¹⁴⁴ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 262



¹⁴⁵ Figure 14

¹⁴⁵ Figure 14. Detail. *Wheel of Existence*. Tibet, 19th century. Pigments on cloth. C2006.66.131, HAR,78. Rubin Museum of Art, New York City



¹⁴⁶ Figure 15

¹⁴⁶ Figure 15. Detail. *Wheel of Existence*. Tibet, 19th century. Pigments on cloth. C2006.66.131, HAR,78. Rubin Museum of Art, New York City

In this story a monk's journey through hell is described:

"The unfortunate is hurled around the *Great Hell* against the four gates, burned and tortured. And then:

Monks, there comes a time once in a very long while when the eastern gateway of this Great Niraya Hell is opened. He rushes there swiftly and speedily; while he is rushing swiftly and speedily his skin burns and his hide burns and his flesh burns and his tendons burn and his eyes are filled with smoke – such is his plight. And though he has attained much [spent many hundred thousand years in Avīci], the gateway is nevertheless closed against him. Thereat he feels feelings that are painful, sharp, severe. But he does not do this time until he makes an end of that evil deed.¹⁴⁷ Not unexpectedly, he experiences the same at the other gates, but, in the end, the eastern gate is open for him, but only for him to be reborn in another hell: the *Great Filth Hell*, where his skin, flesh and bones are cut off. Then he is reborn in the *Ember Hell*, the Forest of Silk-Cotton Trees, which he has to climb – they are of course burning – and then the Hell of burning water. He is hungry, asking for food, and the guards haul him over with a fishhook and fill his mouth with glowing copper pellets that burn his chest and stomach before they pass out with his bowels and intestines. When daring to say he is thirsty, he gets a similar treatment."¹⁴⁸

This excerpt depicts the sad and horrific sufferings of a monk in hell. Here it is mentioned that even though he has already suffered such immense time periods in hell, his evil *karma* has not yet been burned off, and therefore he is continually reborn into different hells. This treatment of hell's 'inmates' shows how brutal and unforgiving Buddhist hell is, and that no actions can change this. Figure 16 is an example of some of the terrible punishments there. Even though these images originate from different Buddhist traditions, they all depict tortures that relate to this story.

¹⁴⁷ MA 4.235 as in MN III, tr. p. 227 n.5

¹⁴⁸ cited from Braarvig, Jens, "The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?" *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 272



¹⁴⁹ Figure 16

¹⁴⁹ Figure 16, <http://bit.ly/11jYTdt>, April 2013



¹⁵⁰ Figure 17

¹⁵⁰ Figure 17. Sculptures in a temple in Xi'an, China.

With the help of animals, metal beaked birds and worms, these demons allow the hell beings to burn off their evil *karma*. The demons are often depicted smiling and laughing. Seemingly they are very much enjoying their job of punishing and torturing hell beings. Even though hell is supposed to be lacking the concept of happiness, these demons are gleeful and happy. In this story another monk's torture and treatment by the guards is described:

Him, *bhikkhus*¹⁵¹, Hell's guards make to lie down and flay him with hatchets [...] they place him downwards and flay him with knives [...] they bind him to a chariot and drive him to and fro over burning, blazing glowing ground [...] they lift him up onto a great hill of burning, blazing, white hot coals and roll him down a fiery slope [...] they double him up and cast him into a hot brazen jar, burning glowing where he boils, coming up like a bubble of foam, then sinking, going now to this side, now to that. There he suffers fierce and bitter pain, nor does he die till that evil *karma* is cancelled. Him, *bhikkhus*, they cast into the great [Hell].¹⁵²

The tortures this monk, as innumerable others, has to endure are solely due to his own bad actions in the past. The extreme suffering experienced in this hell creates a strong visceral reaction in any reader. The didactics of using such visually stimulating descriptions are hoped to be strong enough to instill good behavior in the reader. In Figure 17 a monk is shown in preparation for his punishment. The demons around him show delight in their deeds and are also in place to instill greater fear in the hell being.

¹⁵¹ *bhikku* – (Pali; Sanskrit: *Bhikṣu*) literally, 'beggar', the term is generally translated as 'monk'. It refers to a male follower of the Buddha who has received ordination, served as a novice, and holds all of the approximately 250 vows. The female counterpart is *bhikkhuni* (Sanskrit: *Bhikṣuṇī*), generally translated as 'nun' (Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *Buddhist Scriptures*, Penguin Classics 2004).

¹⁵² Majjhima iii. 166-67, 182-83; AnguttaraNikāya 1.41, translation from Kv tr. p. 346-47

The Lack of Happiness

Buddhist texts often work with the use of apophatic language to describe certain concepts. This technique of using diction to describe what is *not* rather than what *is* enforces the concept of hell being *without* happiness. It is more memorable to know that hell will be without the feelings of happiness, a feeling everyone has experienced at some point. Knowing that hell is full of torture and pain is one thing, but also knowing that within this time there will be no instances of happiness colors the reader's perceptions in that hell is made to seem even more horrible. Nothing more than a creature in *Samsāra's Show*¹⁵³, the beings in hell are thrown around and used like puppets, without free will, time of rest or feeling anything but suffering. With the concept that all existence is suffering while eternally enduring rebirths in *samsāra*, hell seems like it is an even more extreme version of the ordinary *samsāra*. Figure 18 shows a detail of hell and its inhabitants suffering and being punished.

¹⁵³ *Samsāra's Show* – Patrul Rinpoche describes the workings of *samsāra* as *Samsāra's Show*. All inhabitants are 'played' by life, *samsāra*, as characters in a puppet show, without agency and free will.



¹⁵⁴ Figure 18

¹⁵⁴ Figure 18. Detail. *Wheel of Existence*. Tibet, 19th century. Pigments on cloth. C2006.66.131, HAR,78. Rubin Museum of Art, New York City

Even though one can imagine a terrible place like hell teeming with torture and fear, the idea that happiness is completely *absent* rather than just fleeting and rare makes recovery utterly impossible for its inhabitants. The concept of happiness, or unhappiness, lets me pose the question of how this relates directly to the beings in hell. If reincarnated beings are both mentally and physically unable to feel happiness, does this increase or decrease their original suffering? Does the lack of happiness make their existence in hell easier or even harder? If they are not aware of the concept of happiness, does this lessen their pains and fears, since they have nothing positive to compare it to?

By entering hell, one enters a realm “devoid of happiness.”¹⁵⁵ Having a space in the universe in which happiness does not exist makes punishment even more intense because the beings in this realm have absolutely nothing else to expect for a seemingly eternal period of time. Not having a concept of positivity can be very limiting, but also may be helpful for the hell-dwellers. If they are aware that happiness once existed and they are being deprived of it, their punishments could feel worse. If, however, hell is set up in such a way that they are not aware that happiness even exists, they may be spared a lot of wishful thinking and hopes of positive things.

Creating a space in the universe that is “devoid of happiness” shapes a place in which misery is the only possibility. Since nothing positive can happen, the only other option is to live with constant negativity. Whereas it can be argued that their feelings of suffering and misery are intensified by the deep lack of happiness, it can also be argued that since they are only accustomed to hell, they are not actually suffering more. This,

¹⁵⁵ B.C. Law, *Heaven and Hell in Buddhist Perspective*, p. 94

however, does not answer the question of why there exists this absence of happiness. With innumerable years of punishment and torture ahead, beings reborn in the realm of hell may lose all hope of happiness and merely exist. Explaining the lack of happiness through a *loss* of happiness is different than the utter *absence* of it. With the existence of an entire realm with the complete absence of happiness means that other realms, such as the human realm, do have occurrences of happiness even if very brief and impermanent.

The Four Noble Truths teach that all life is suffering. If the human experience is purely suffering, how can happiness ever be experienced? By making the clear distinction between being able to experience happiness in the human realm and the absence thereof in hell argues for the impermanence of even *duḥkha*. This simile puts the negativity of *saṃsāra* into perspective:

While suffering certainly exists in human life, it is not unremittingly painful. There are many pleasant experiences too, such that on balance the human realm is thought to offer an appropriate 'middle way' between the less attractive alternatives. Suffering is thus like the grit in the oyster, which in time producing the priceless pearl of *nirvāṇa*.¹⁵⁶

Even though all life is suffering, it is sprinkled with instances of happiness, which makes the thought of *not* having this happiness, hell. However, since hell is equally part of *saṃsāra* as the human birth, it is difficult to draw the line between them. One can argue that even though in some births the suffering is more intense than in others, in general, one suffers at some level at all times. Humans still have the capability to experience happiness in some form. Beings reborn in hell, however, a place purely *without* happiness, have no other choice than feel terror and fear. This raises the

¹⁵⁶ Keown, Damien, *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 249

question whether the opposite of happiness is terror and fear, or if the lack of happiness immediately implies that the hell beings experience opposing feelings and emotions.

With nowhere to escape to or to get a moment's rest from their punishments, there would not be any time or occasion to feel happiness, even if it existed in the hell realms at all. Never is a time created in which they are not punished or emotionally tortured, hence the moment of relief never occurs, not allowing a place for happiness. As another part of a rebirth in hell and part of the punishment, the beings are denied the feelings of happiness in any situation, which adds another layer of suffering to the physical and emotional pains. Therefore, if the hell beings are unaware of the possibility of happiness their experiences of pain may actually be less severe than if they knew what happiness was. By denying them happiness completely they are, in a way, being protected from another level of suffering which is created through mentally comparing what they have to what they could have.

As humans, once knowing the possibility of having something better, what one *does* have often does not seem good enough. Similarly, if the hell beings were aware of feelings such as happiness their torments in hell would be perceived even worse because they knew they were not happy. In Figure 19 two hell beings suffer the punishments by demons. The hell being sliced apart is definitely not happy, and equally so the observer. The second hell being does not have the chance to feel happy about *not* being sliced apart, since they are aware that they are next.



157 Figure 19

However, if hell lacks happiness, how can the demons be experiencing it? Is it only supposed to be without happiness for the hell dwellers, or as a general rule? The demons could be smiling and laughing because they know they are actually helping the hell beings.¹⁵⁸ Since the demons are aware that they are helping the hell beings qualify for a better rebirth in the future by making them burn off their bad *karma*, they are happy. Even though they know they are hurting them, they also know that they are actually helping them. Therefore, without hell, they would be destined to suffer increasingly worsening births for the rest of eternity. Through the existence of hell, demons and punishment, they have the opportunity to burn off all evil *karma* and have a positive future.

If the demons are not actually torturing the hell beings, but helping them to burn off bad *karma*, this could be considered accumulating good *karma* for themselves, and their future reincarnations. This foresight by the demons could allow them to think into the future and be happy for the hell beings, themselves and their future. The paradox of creatures doing evil things in hell is confusing since even though they are already in hell, they are accumulating bad *karma* for themselves by punishing others. Therefore even though they are accumulating bad *karma* for themselves, they are still happy because they know they are helping others. This action of putting oneself into a bad position in order to help others could in turn be considered positive, therefore finally accounting for good *karma* for the demons.

In other interpretations, however, the demons are not considered happy for the hell beings at all. Even though they are smiling and seemingly enjoying themselves, they

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Evan Goodman, Rubin Museum of Art, New York, New York, January 11th, 2013

are enjoying themselves for other reasons. The demons are represented as evil and full of hatred, rather than joy for the hell beings. Instead of being happy, it is described that “the demons further vent their hatred by pounding and pulverizing the sinners and chase them with hot pokers and bows and arrows.”¹⁵⁹ This view on the demons happiness is totally opposite, since in this scenario they are full of hatred and not joy. Taking pleasure in the hell dwellers’ misery embodies the concept of *Schadenfreude*.¹⁶⁰ The demons, watching the horrible tortures and pains the sufferers are experiencing, are happy because they are enjoying themselves seeing others in pain.

In Figure 20 two demons are depicted forcefully feeding a hell being boiling water and burning their limbs. The darker demon, to the right, is particularly enjoying the scene, which is expressed by his physical forcefulness and smile. The concept of *anitya* is completely permeable, and therefore also exists for the demons. Since nothing is permanent, not even the demon’s existence will be permanent as guards and torturers in hell, and they too, may eventually be reincarnated. The purpose of these demons, both for burning off evil *karma* and the prospect of attaining a better rebirth, is only useful through the extreme thoroughness of these punishments and their never-ending repetitions.

¹⁵⁹ Daigan and Alicia Matsunaga, *The Buddhist Concept of Hell*, Philosophical Library NY, p. 86

¹⁶⁰ *Schadenfreude* – (German): finding pleasure and happiness in someone else’s misery and pain



¹⁶¹ Figure 20

¹⁶¹ Figure 20. <http://bit.ly/11oCVpq>. February 2013

Conclusion

A Place of Retribution

The idea that the cosmos and all existence is a mere transitory state allows all of existence to be put into perspective. Birth on earth is just as transitory and temporary as birth in hell.¹⁶² Even though the birth in hell may last innumerable years longer than the birth on earth, it is still temporary. A birth in hell is an inevitable occurrence and part of the cycle of rebirth that cannot be evaded. The *karmic* potential accumulated over millions of births will eventually lead to a birth in hell, since even by merely existing, eating and drinking, one continuously cultivates bad *karma*. It is not guaranteed that one evil deed will lead into an unfortunate rebirth, however, but rather the accumulation of bad *karma* over an incalculable amount of time. This accumulation can be visualized with a simile: “*Kamma* is accumulated gradually, and eventually, like when the load of a ship is too heavy, it sinks, just as one gradually accumulating bad *kamma* in the end will sink into hell.”¹⁶³

The lesson learned from these tortures is that bad actions in any lifetime will result in hell eventually, and should therefore always be avoided. Furthermore, instead of merely avoiding bad actions, good action should be practiced. Another bad aspect of Buddhist hell is that the huge amounts of time spent there only postpones the time until *nirvāṇa* can be reached through better births. Only the worst pain on many levels of physical and mental pain is powerful enough to alleviate evil *karma*. The tortures of hell

¹⁶² Akira Sadakata, *Buddhist Cosmology*, p. 91

¹⁶³ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 278

can be compared to the delights with the gods. In the god realms, the pleasures are as indescribable as the suffering of hell.¹⁶⁴

Considering multiple aspects of Buddhist thought about hell with locations both physical and mental, it is not possible to draw one strict line about a true or false claim. “Later Buddhist philosophical traditions [...] tend to see the world as a projection of the collective mental states of living beings”¹⁶⁵ whereas others are more traditional, such as the “orthodox [Buddhist] view is that hell is real”¹⁶⁶ and a physical place. Here the question of the purpose of hell arises. Is the purpose of Buddhist hell really to scare away evildoers through fear of punishment? One can argue that the punishments the hell beings experience in hell are actually not in order to teach them a lesson, but rather to burn off the evil *karma* they have accumulated. If the purpose of hell is not to scare evildoers but rather cleanse them in order to qualify them to have a better rebirth in the future, should hell then actually be considered a fortunate rebirth?

The theories that exist about Buddhist hell are all real teachings, each true to its individual school of Buddhism. From an outsider perspective it is fascinating to look at the various ways society invents things in order to motivate, drive and support people. The Buddhist hell is not only a vehicle to deter from bad behavior and encourage the harvesting of good *karma*, it is much more than that. Hell, especially the mental hell the individual creates for himself or herself, is a place that every living being has been to. And even though everyone has experienced it, the best way to deal with it, and get out of it, has not yet been discovered. The concepts of Buddhist hell partially address the

¹⁶⁴ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 270

¹⁶⁵ *Kathavatthu* VII. 10.4

¹⁶⁶ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 263

question about how to deal with these traumatic issues, and how to utilize the Buddhist religion in order avoid heartbreaks and overall suffering. Therefore, a bad mental state is its own result and a good mental state is equally its own result. This can lead to the argument “that the consciousness with which we take life is the very consciousness with which we burn in [hell].”¹⁶⁷ One negative thought is quickly followed by many more, and so it seems as if bad things attract bad things, and vice versa. Following along with the concept of *karma*, good actions also help to further good things. The demons in hell that cause such agony and terror can be interpreted as physical and mental manifestations of every individual’s bad *karma*. All bad experiences originate from within. Therefore, demons from hell are not external beings but fragments of the self.

The argument of the personal, mental hell is debated and can also apply to non-Buddhists, like myself. “Essentially the world we live in is our own creation: we have created it by our own *karma*, by our deeds, words, and thoughts motivated either by greed, hatred, and delusion or by nonattachment, friendliness, and wisdom. The cosmos is thus a reflection of our actions, which are in turn the products of our hearts and minds.”¹⁶⁸ Buddhism is not based on the importance of an all-knowing individual, but based on trying to make our human lives on earth less painful. The drive behind the Buddhist teachings of hell is to convey the importance of non-attachment in order to avoid suffering in the future. Buddhist hell can be a gruesome place, “realms in which a tortured consciousness experiences abominable nightmares, where every object of the senses appears repulsive and ugly.”¹⁶⁹ These nightmares are like movies in the mind

¹⁶⁷ Braarvig, Jens, “The Buddhist Hell: An Early Instance of the Idea?” *Numen* 56, Brill 2009, p. 261

¹⁶⁸ SamyuttaNikāya I, 62

¹⁶⁹ S. IV. 126 cited from Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, p. 34

that no one but the self can see, and no one but the individual can feel the pain. Most writings and images of Buddhist hell show a “persistent fascination with gruesome scenes of torture”¹⁷⁰ that readers unfamiliar with the Buddhist thought and practice about hell will find appalling and repulsive. However, even if they are shocking, these images are products of the human mind as a result of trying to find a way to explain the sufferings everyone experiences in life, in *samsāra*.

The hell every individual lives through must not always be as terrifying as *Avīci*. Hell can be as horrible as having to experience the death of a loved one, or as harmless as having to go to work after being up all night taking care of one’s sick children. The intensity of every individual’s hell varies on a daily basis. Throughout the day hell can fluctuate; for example, good news can become irrelevant after tripping and breaking one’s foot. Whether hells are physical places, whether they exist solely in every individual’s mind, or whether they only come to us in nightmares, they do exist somewhere for everyone.

¹⁷⁰ Charles D. Orzech, *Mechanisms of Violent Retribution in Chinese Hell Narratives*, p. 111

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